

Once Upon a Winter's Night . . .

Once upon a winter's night, a young girl huddled in a dingy alleyway in wizarding London, numb and blue with cold, for that January was one of the rawest anyone could remember. Snow lay in fitful clumps throughout the street and ice glistened on the lampposts and off the awnings of the shops. It was just after New Year's, and if this had been a different situation, the shivering waif crouching in the dirty snow would have been tucked up in her bed, warm and safe and cozy. But the nine-year-old was a foundling, abandoned by the one person who should have cared for her, now that her mother had breathed her last.

She knelt in the snow, trembling as the bitter wind swept through the refuse that littered the alley, cupping in one hand a single match. The match burned with an odd persistent flame, and the child gazed at it with a singular intensity in her bright blue eyes. She knew she was ill-prepared to be out in such weather, her favorite blue shirt was in tatters now after spending two weeks sleeping on the hard ground and cobblestones and her matching skirt was as well. Her once soft white cloak was now a rag and she had torn strips off it and bound her hands in a futile attempt to keep from getting frostbite. Her feet were bare, some children had stolen her shoes as a prank two days ago and she had never seen them again.

You should keep moving. If you stay still, you'll freeze, she reminded herself. But she was so tired, tired of running and hiding, tired of being chased away from the storefronts because the shopkeepers thought her a vagrant thief out to steal their wares. She shivered and wished that she could get warm and wished most of all for the one thing she could never have again, that had died when her mother had-a home and a family. Once she had a home, and a pretty room with rosebud wallpaper and a soft eiderdown comforter with printed unicorns and shoes and had never gone cold or hungry. Once, but no longer. All of that had gone when her mother had, and the man who called himself her father had cast her off.

She shut her eyes against the threatened tears. Don't cry. Don't. It won't help any. She would not remember that awful day, that cold icy voice declaring, "You are no daughter of mine. I know no one named

Holly Sinclair. Now leave immediately, before I make you regret the day you drew breath, Squib child!"

Squib child. She had never truly understood what it meant to be born with just a whisper of magic until then. Never knew it rendered her an outcast in the world of magic, a world that sneered at those who, like her, had been skipped by magic's blessing.

But now she knew, to her bitter sorrow, and unbidden, two tears slipped down her cheeks to freeze upon her pale face.

It's so cold tonight. And all I have are these matches to keep me warm, that I stole from the pub across the way when they were sweeping up for the day. A Muggle curiosity, left behind by some wizard who wanted to understand them better, I guess. Ha! Should have asked me, I could tell him what it's like, without magic.

She fixed her eyes on the flickering flame in her hand, which was all that kept the dark and cold at bay there in the alley next to Eyelops Owl Emporium. Except . . . there was one thing she possessed, one small gift that was a legacy from her mother, Valina, who had once been a talented witch. Holly was a seer, one who could sometimes see the future in a single flame, if her gift chose to reveal what might be.

Please, please, show me a way out of here. I'm so cold. So very cold. Merlin have mercy, but I think my fingers are falling off. She wriggled her hand and the match flame danced upon the brick wall. This was her last match, she had burned the others over the course of two hours, wishing she could break into a shop to take shelter, but they were all warded and protected against such things.

Suddenly she felt a sharp pain in her head, as always occurred when her Sight activated. She bit her lip, but the pain was swiftly gone and then her eyes focused upon the tiny ember burning brightly . . .burning . . .burning . . .

She saw herself, pale and scrawny, starvling street brat, crumpled in a heap upon the dirt encrusted snow, the match in her hands burnt out, still and lifeless. But then a ray of light appeared and she saw her

spirit arise from her body and drift upwards, to a familiar figure who waited just within the light. "Holly! Come, luv, it's time to come home! I've been waiting for you, my sweet lovely girl."

"Mum?" She blinked and then she could see the wispy figure of her mother's shade, holding out her arms. "It's really you?"

"Yes, sweetling. Come, Holly, don't be afraid. We're going home."

"How? Our home is gone."

"Our new home, little one. The one called heaven."

And then Holly understood and she no longer hesitated, running on winged feet into her mother's embrace.

She blinked, coming out of the vision with a start. For one single moment, she had been warm. She blew softly upon the match in her hand, willing the little flame to keep burning. The match was almost burnt down to her fingertips. Is that all there is for me? To die here in the cold, all alone? I want to see my mum again, but I don't want to die here, like a stray cat, frozen to death. Oh please God, there must be another way, somehow . . .

And again she whimpered as her Sight stabbed her and showed her yet another possibility . . .

She was still crumpled in a heap in the middle of the street, but this time there was no glowing light, only a slight boy with dark hair and glasses tripping over her and exclaiming, "What the blazes . . . hey! What are you doing in the middle of the street-taking a nap?"

He knelt down then and shook her shoulder with his green-gloved hand, and then his eyes went wide with alarm. "Merlin, you're half-frozen to death!" he stood up quickly, removing his cloak and throwing it over her and glancing up and down the street, it was early morning and hardly any shops were open. "Dad! Where are you? Come here quick, I need you!"

She heard an answering baritone, "Harry? Where are you? What's wrong?"

"Over here, Dad! By the Owl Emporium."

The boy waved and suddenly a tall man in a black great coat was beside them, stern and imposing, yet somehow she knew he would never hurt her and he pointed a wand at her and cried some magic words she had never heard and she was warm again and she knew she would be all right . . .

Holly blinked, her vision misted with tears, as so often happened after a Seeing, from gazing too long into the fire. Two visions. Two possible outcomes. But which was the true one? That was always the problem with her Sight-it never revealed absolutely the future, only glimpses into what could be. And she never knew how to control it, nor to see how to bring about one possibility over another.

That was why he had called her talent useless, fit for parlor tricks and amusing dumb Muggles. Worthless! A worthless talent for a worthless brat. Now get out!

The cruel words echoed in her head as the match died and she wrapped her arms about her skinny frame in a desperate attempt to keep warm, knowing all the while how useless it was. She walked two paces forward and then another two, until she stood at the mouth of the alley and then she could go no further.

Her legs gave way and she crumpled to the frozen cobbles, and her last thought was of her beloved mother, who had loved her daughter despite her lack of magic always.

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Several blue-skinned wind sprites appeared with a pop above the ragged form, whispering and crying in alarm. She fades, my brothers! cried one. She is an innocent, though the spark is faint in her. We must find a way to keep her alive until that which she Saw comes to save her.

Whispers of concern and a faint disapproval followed that statement, for the sprites usually did not interfere in mortal affairs, but this was a special case. And so the tiny beings fluttered and gathered around the freezing child, fanning her with their wings, and using their magic to keep her breathing just long enough for dawn to break and a certain young wizard to awaken and entreat his father to take him to Diagon Alley to shop for a birthday present.

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"Harry, must we go shopping today?" Severus grumbled as he set out toast, thickly buttered, with strawberry jam, and a platter of bacon and eggs and broiled tomatoes. "I had been meaning to take this weekend to relax a bit and perhaps read." He glanced out the window of the breakfast nook in their small house, and noted the way the wind was blowing and the trees across the street were trembling and shook his head. "It's quite cold out today, not a good day to go shopping, son."

"But, Dad, this is the only time I can go to get you a present before you go back to Hogwarts." Harry told him, sitting down and helping himself to a bit of everything. "Your birthday's on Wednesday, remember?"

Severus heaved a long suffering sigh. "Harry, I've told you before, you don't need to get me anything. You being here with me is enough of a gift for me-" the Potions Master began the familiar litany.

"No, Dad. Everyone should get presents on their birthday," Harry argued, his chin setting in a familiar stubborn line. He could never understand why his dad always said this, every year it was the same, and every year he ended up dragging Severus to Diagon Alley so he could get him a special present. This year it would be specially good, since he had been saving all of his allowance for weeks to afford the new blown glass set of beakers and book of rare potions recipes he had seen in the apothecary at the start of last term, when Severus took him along to restock his ingredients for his classroom. "I won't take long, I know exactly what I want. Then we can come home and you can read the whole afternoon and so can I."

Severus snorted. "You mean sleep the whole afternoon, don't you, Little Mischief? You were up late last night reading under the covers."

Harry gaped at him. "How'd you know?"

Severus smirked. "I'm your father, I know everything." Actually he knew what Harry had been doing because he had done the same thing at that age, he had always loved reading at night, when all was quiet and his father was absent down at the pub or passed out on the couch.

Harry just rolled his eyes, prompting his father to give him a rather sharp look. "Please, Dad? It's early, there won't be anyone out yet except the store owners and you won't have to worry about running into any students begging you to change their midterm grades or some parent wanting to know why their kid didn't pass Advanced potions this term. They're probably still asleep."

Severus let his son squirm for a few minutes while he ate his eggs then agreed. "Very well, Harry. I will give you an hour, no more. I have no wish to spend my whole Saturday arguing with some foolish parent about their child's well-deserved mark in my final exam or listen to a whole week's worth of excuses as to why Johnny couldn't turn in his last assignment because his great aunt Muriel from Cornwall died and he had to go to the funeral and was prostrate with grief even though he only saw her once a year on Christmas."

"An extra half an hour," Harry returned. "What if the thing I wanted to get you was sold? Then I'll have to pick out something else."

"You're pushing it, son."

Harry shot his father his best Lily look, where he made his brilliant green eyes all huge and pleading, because he knew how much his dad had loved his mother and Harry had her eyes.

Severus groaned. "Fine! An hour and a half. But that's it."

Harry hid a grin. Works like a charm almost every time. "Thanks, Dad."

Severus didn't bother to answer, he simply sipped his tea and wondered when the hell he had become such a pushover. It's the eyes, Sev. Her eyes. Your one weakness and the sly little snake knows it.

His eyes met those of the great silver wolf lounging casually near the stove and he growled, "What are you staring at, Silver? Maybe I should just send you along with Harry, huh?"

The silver wolf opened his huge jaws and grinned, then shook his head in a firm gesture of disagreement.

"Dad, Silver can't come with me. He'd cause a riot or something."

"Not if you put him on a leash," Severus suggested slyly.

Silver growled, and Snape laughed. The big wolf was clearly insulted at the mere suggestion that he be treated like a family pet, when he was a wild creature and more, a former wizard himself who had chosen life as a wolf over suffering the curse of his werewolf nature every full moon.

"Dad was only kidding," Harry soothed. "We'd never put you on a leash, Silver."

Silver made a grumbling noise, gave the Potions Master a glare from his amber eyes and put his head back on his paws and dozed. He was rarely at the Snape residence, preferring the forest to being cooped up underneath a roof, even if he was a member of the family. But he made exceptions on occasion, especially during the winter, when the vast snowy silence made him long for the comforts of a home and companionship. Wolf Wood, situated at the edge of the Yorkshire moor, provided him with all the space he needed to roam and to hunt, but Harry and Severus were the only wizards who knew the truth about him, that he had once been Remus Lupin, former werewolf, and he had pledged his life as Harry's guardian.

"That's what you think," Severus muttered under his breath, and Silver opened one eye and snarled lightly in warning. The tall wizard

smirked and muttered, "Lighten up, Lupin! Can't you tell I'm not serious? Or is your brilliant lupine nose failing you?"

Silver gave a half-bark as if to say, You wish, Snape! then shook his head and went back to his nap, he had been out hunting late last night and had only just returned to the Snape residence through the special Portkey Severus had set up for him.

Harry chuckled, sometimes his father and Silver behaved like two brothers, bickering over almost everything, but loving each other nonetheless, though neither of them would ever admit it. He finished his breakfast and washed up the plates without being told, and then Severus Flooed them to Diagon Alley.

They stepped out of the Leaky Cauldron and Harry wrapped his scarf more snugly about his face, the wind was brutal today. His dad had been right, this was not a very good day to linger while walking along the street. But the apothecary was just ahead and Harry turned to Severus and said, "Uh, Dad? Could you, um . . . go into Flourish and Blotts a moment, please? So you don't see your present? I want it to be a surprise."

"As you wish," Severus agreed, though he had been planning to visit the bookstore eventually, he never could resist its siren call. "An hour and a half, young man, remember it."

"Okay. I know how to tell time, I'm not an idiot, y'know."

"Watch that cheeky mouth," warned his father, then he spun and entered the bookstore on the right, leaving Harry to make his way down the street towards the apothecary.

The wind was blowing extra hard, or so it seemed, and Harry hunched his head down to cut down on the stinging icy sensation that made his cheeks tingle. He had been colder than this before, when he had nearly drowned falling through a frozen pond three years past, on a Christmas holiday in Yorkshire. Ever since, Harry had not enjoyed skating much, though he was quite a good skater.

"Brrr! Feels like Antarctica here," he muttered into his scarf, wishing he knew a warming charm the way his father did. He could do accidental magic, but so far hadn't managed to focus his power enough to cast an actual spell. But Severus had reassured him that day was coming soon and Harry would simply have to be patient.

He was so preoccupied with the weather and hoping that the set of beakers and the book he wanted to purchase hadn't been sold that he didn't see the lump of rags and snow in the middle of the street until his trainer caught on it and he tripped, nearly sprawling face first in the street.

"Huh? What the blazes?" He stood up, thanking God that no one had seen him falling like a klutz over his own feet and a stupid pile of . . . snow? He squinted, for it wasn't just snow. There was a . . . hand lying there.

"Bloody Merlin's ghost!" Harry cried, using an expression Severus was fond of. "That's not just a pile of snow, it's a . . ." He knelt and brushed off the coating of snow and only then did he notice the tiny wind sprites all about, pointing at the still figure and urging him to hurry. "A girl!" He took her hand in his gloved one and gasped. "Merlin, you're half-frozen to death! Damn!"

He ripped off his cloak, draping it over her, she looked to be nearly his age, but she was so very still . . . like a wax doll. He tore off a glove and put a hand against her neck.

There. A flutter of life.

The wind sprites chattered. Hurry, master Harry! She fades!

"Right. Uh . . ." Harry paused, then he stood up and yelled as loud as he could for Severus.

Severus appeared next to him an instant later, wand out, and Harry pointed to the comatose girl and cried, "Dad, she's freezing to death, help her!"

Severus took in the situation at glance and never hesitated, his battle-honed training as a spy taking over. He quickly cast a warming charm on the little girl, whose pale golden hair was spread in wet clumps against her threadbare clothing. Her clothing began to steam as the charm began to work, melting the snow and ice from her body.

Severus knelt, gently slipping an arm about her half-frozen body, and lifting her into his arms. He didn't know how she had come to be in such dire straits, but that information could be obtained later, once he was assured she wasn't going to die. He had only seen one other child with such a bad case of hypothermia before and that had been Harry after his disaster on the lake that Christmas.

The child's eyes fluttered open and for a single instant Severus found himself looking into a pair of beautiful sapphire eyes. "It's all right. I won't hurt you. I'm trying to help," he murmured, uncertain if she were coherent enough to understand him.

Then she spoke, her voice as fragile as a wind sprite's wings. "I know."

Then she passed out cold in his arms, but she was smiling.

"Dad? Is she okay?" Harry asked, peering over Severus's shoulder.

"She will be, if I can get her treated for hypothermia right away. Sorry to cut your trip short, son, but we need to return home immediately." Severus said, and reached out and grasped Harry's arm firmly before Apparating back to their house. He just prayed he would be in time.

This the sequel to "A Wolf in Winter" please read that first before starting this story, otherwise you will be confused. This chapter is based upon the fairy tale "The Little Match Girl" by Hans Christian Anderson. Hope you all like!

Awakening

"Harry, fetch me as many thick blankets as you can, and my emergency Winter Potions Rescue kit," Severus ordered as soon as they had set foot over the threshold of their home. "Quick, now! Time is of the essence!"

Harry obeyed, rushing off to the linen closet to grab the blankets first and then to the small potions lab to get the emergency potions kit Severus always kept on the first shelf beside the door. Ever since Harry's near fatal ice accident, Severus always kept a stock of potions on hand to combat any winter disasters that might occur. But this was the first time he had needed to resort to it since that day in Yorkshire, thank Merlin.

Meanwhile, Severus dragged an afghan off the sofa on his way to the bathroom, cast a warming charm on it, and vanished the girl's ice-rimed garments, wrapping the heated afghan about the slender frame. The child was still unconscious, but Severus could feel her heart beating steadily beneath his hand and knew she would not succumb to death. This child, whoever she was, was a fighter, and yet another who had secured the blessing of the wind sprites, for he had seen the diminutive fairies hovering when he Apparated over to his son.

He quickly drew a tepid bath, not too hot, and placed the child in it. In cases of prolonged exposure to freezing temperatures, he knew it was best to warm the patient up gradually, and his Anti-Frostbite Draft would react too quickly and might damage her circulation, so he used the warm bath first to thaw out her extremities and increase her temperature by degrees.

"Dad? I've got the potions kit and the blankets!" Harry called from the hallway. "Where are you?"

"In here, son," answered the Potions Master.

Harry raced down the hall to the bathroom, knocked, and then entered. "What are you . . .? Oh!" he turned an odd shade of red when he saw what Severus was doing with the girl, then quickly placed the potions kit on the counter and the blankets on the floor

before hastily departing. Severus noted in amusement that the tips of the ten-year-old's ears were scarlet.

Then he returned to monitoring the little girl's progress, holding her head above water with one hand and casting a diagnostic with his other. Good thing you're ambidextrous, Sev, he thought wryly. Then he nodded in relief as he noted the child's temperature steadily rising and color starting to bloom once more in her ghost-pale features.

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Harry backed out of the doorway so fast he almost fell over his own feet. Merlin, if he had known that his father was going to give the kid a bath he would have left the blankets and the kit outside the door! Not that he'd seen much of the girl beyond a naked arm and her head, but still . . . knowing she was lying there in the tub in the altogether was totally embarrassing, especially since Harry was not used to seeing girls in any state of undress at all, living as he did in an all male household.

He turned about, nearly running right into a curious Silver, who looked at Harry and then at the closed bathroom door and cocked his head in puzzlement. "Hey, Silver." Harry greeted, giving the big wolf a gentle caress behind the ears, and then saying, "You'll never guess what happened when we went to Diagon Alley. I found a half-dead kid frozen in the snow, that's why we came back so early. Dad's trying to heal her now . . . that's why I brought him his emergency potions kit and blankets."

He headed back down to the kitchen. "Guess I better make some tea, I think we could use a cup, right, Silver?"

Silver whined softly and gave a sort of nod, over the years the transformed wizard had learned to make various gestures in order to communicate with his human family, since neither Harry or Severus possessed the gift of Animal Speech. But the wolf did not follow Harry to the kitchen, instead he sat down in the hallway and tilted an ear towards the closed door, listening to the sound of splashing and Severus's quiet murmuring as he tended to the stricken girl.

"You're a tough little thing, aren't you? Either that or you have Merlin's own luck, because by all rights last night should have killed you. . ."

Silver whuffed in agreement, his nose told him that the child had been in dire straits indeed, but was now improving, slowly, but she was alive. He wondered sadly what had caused her to get in such a situation, and settled down with his tail tucked about his feet, content to wait for answers, patient as only a hunter could be.

After twenty minutes, Severus withdrew the child from the bath and administered the first draft to her, using a small medicine dropper, stroking her throat until she swallowed. He rubbed her all over with a special salve that he had invented that counteracted the effects of frostbite, penetrating all the muscles and warming them up with a soothing infusion of heat, negating the need for massaging frozen limbs. That done he transfigured a small towel into a soft flannel nightgown and slipped it on her, along with a pair of underwear and fuzzy socks, also hastily transfigured from washrags and wrapped her in all the blankets Harry had provided, after casting Warmth Charms upon them first.

Then he carried her from the bathroom, intending to bring her into the den, where a roaring fire was always burning during the day when he was at home. He nearly trod upon Silver, who for some reason had taken up sentry position outside the door.

"Blazes, wolf! What are you doing here? I nearly fell over you, you overgrown fur rug!"

Silver whuffed, looked pointedly at the bundle in the Potion Master's arms.

"It's a little girl, in case you were wondering," Severus replied to the wolf's curious glance. "Harry found her half-frozen in the snow in Diagon Alley and I'm going to do my damndest to save her. No one else seemed to care, I think she was there all night."

Silver growled in disapproval and Severus nodded curtly, before sweeping down the hall to the den and setting the comatose child down on the sofa. Some more color flushed the pale cheeks, but

Severus noted she still felt cold, and he quickly administered the rest of the Anti-Frostbite Draft and a Pepper Up potion and a Pain Reliving Draft too, for he knew the returning circulation was sure to hurt like seven hells.

She stirred, and he smoothed a stray lock of pale hair from her pert face. She was still unconscious, but even so there was something oddly familiar about her.

Where have I seen that shade of hair before? And those features? They're softened, but still, I know I've seen them before . . .the former spy mused, rechecking his patient.

The fire was blazing, throwing off heat like a blast furnace, and Severus quickly unbuttoned his robe and hung it over the back of the recliner, it was far too warm for his black attire, and besides he was home and could relax. He settled on the edge of the couch close beside the slumbering girl, watching her chest rising and falling intently.

Silver padded over, sniffed the child, then to Severus's astonishment, sprang up on the couch and draped himself over the child, giving her his own body heat as well.

"That's smart, Lupin," praised the wizard. "You'll warm her up as good as any of my potions, I'd wager."

Silver shot the professor a smug look and nuzzled the girl's cheek.

"Dad, I made some tea," Harry said, carrying two mugs on a tray and some milk and sugar into the den. "I figured you could use some and maybe she could too once she, uh, woke up."

"That's good thinking, Harry," his father said, ruffling his son's hair and then taking a mug of steaming winter spice tea and adding two lumps of sugar and some milk. "Thank you."

Harry looked over at the mysterious girl and nearly giggled at the sight of the huge gray wolf stretched out atop her like a furry living blanket. "Silver, what on earth?"

"He's keeping her warm, Harry," Severus explained. "His body temperature is several degrees higher than ours and acts just like a warmth charm, if not better, since it doesn't fade."

"Oh. Did you tell him to do that?"

Severus shook his head. "No, he did that on his own."

"Will she be okay, Dad?"

"I believe so. Though it is a miracle she lasted the night, given what she had on, which was practically nothing," Severus shook his head angrily. Then he sipped his tea and gestured for Harry to sit in the recliner next to him.

The girl turned her head and her profile nagged him, where had he seen that chin and nose before?

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Holly was sitting in the brocade wing chair, cuddling on her father's knee, the way she used to do when she was very small, and her father still loved her, before he discovered she had inherited none of his magic. Before he had cast her away like an unwanted pair of shoes.

It was blessedly warm in the parlor, she could feel the heat from the fire upon her face and her father's arms about her. She gazed up into his face, that handsome aristocratic profile she had inherited, along with his pale hair, though her eyes were her mother's. "I missed you, Daddy," she told him earnestly.

"I know, pet. I was away too long this time," he said, tweaking her nose affectionately. "I promise I'll visit sooner next time."

"When?"

"Perhaps Saturday next, if all goes well with my job. Now, why don't you get that new book I brought you and we'll read together? Or would you like to play with your new doll instead?"

"Read first," she declared, her sapphire eyes sparkling, for she loved spending time with her father, who was rarely there at the flat she shared with her mother. He appeared and disappeared like lightning, he had an important job and her mother had told her that it demanded a lot of his time and so he could not be home like other fathers were.

So Holly had learned to cherish the infrequent visits and spent every moment she could with her dad, who was a powerful wizard and one of the Minister of Magic's most trusted advisors.

"As you wish, princess," laughed the tall man, and set her down so she could get her new book and exchanged a fond glance with the slender witch standing off to the left of the chair, who smiled at the scene of domestic bliss before her, and sat down on the settle nearby, her feet tucked up under her pale navy silk robe.

"You spoil her, Dragon," she remarked, looking after her child with a sweet smile.

"So? What's a father for, if not to spoil his only daughter?" laughed the blond wizard indulgently. "Someday she'll be a powerful witch, just like her mother and a credit to her bloodline. But for now, she's my little princess, and she can have anything I can buy her."

Valina raised an eyebrow. "Except your name."

The other shrugged. "Names are for heirs, Valina. But she has my blood and my looks, and I shall provide for her, and with those she should do quite well. I shall sponsor her at her coming out ball at sixteen and make sure she has an advantageous match with another pureblood family." He chuckled at Valina's worried expression. "Quit worrying, sweet nightingale, I have everything under control. She'll be the most sought out witch of her generation, right, princess?"

And Holly agreed, though she was not certain what her father meant, but it didn't matter. All that mattered was that he was here, on that

fine Saturday afternoon, and Holly had a whole four hours to spend with him, reading and talking and cuddling into his shoulder.

Sometimes he was away for months, and Holly would count the days impatiently, but he always returned, bringing gifts for her and her mother, usually fine clothes and slippers and jewelry for Valina and toys and dresses for Holly.

And she would run to him, and he would pick her up and toss her into the air and cry, "How's my little princess? Have you learned any magic yet?"

And she would hug him tight and reply, "Not yet, I'm too little, but maybe someday . . .I'm only five, 'member, Daddy?"

"Ah. Next year then, your magic will begin to show itself," he nodded indulgently, and kissed her and gave her a new velvet cape lined with ermine. "A royal cape for a royal little lady."

Holly had squealed with delight and insisted on trying it on right then, twirling about until she was dizzy, and fell into her father's arms, laughing . . .

A smile appeared on the child's face for a brief instant, then it faded and she moaned as a terrible prickling sensation spread throughout her body.

Silver whined uneasily and licked her cheek as she stirred fitfully, whimpering in her sleep.

But one day all of that changed, the dark day when her daddy discovered his beautiful princess daughter had no magic, not even enough to light a candle by accident.

"Try again!" he had yelled, stabbing a finger at the huge beeswax taper in the silver sconce on the kitchen table.

Holly scrunched her forehead up and tried, tried so very hard to light the candle, but it was no use. It remained cold and still not even a

plume of smoke to mark her effort. "I . . .I am, Daddy!" she cried, biting her lip. Her head was starting to ache, she was trying so hard.

He glared at her, and said in a soft deadly tone, "No, you aren't. I can tell. Now concentrate, dammit! Feel the magic inside you, Holly and call it forth. DO it!"

She shut her eyes and tried again, desperate to please her father, who was never disappointed in her ever, but it was no use. An hour passed and then two and still the candle remained unlit and all Holly had was a raging headache and a furious parent to show for it.

"I can't do it!" she had sobbed, putting her face in her hands. "Please, can't we stop now, Daddy? I'm tired and my head hurts."

"No, we're going to stay here until you light the damn candle, Holly Amanda Sinclair, I don't care if your head hurts, we'll stay here all bloody night until you quit being lazy and concentrate, understand?" roared her father, and he gave Holly such a look of disgust and anger that she shrank back from him, afraid as she had never been afraid before. "Now try again!"

And she had tried, until she was nearly on the verge of collapse, her head hurting so badly she could not help sobbing, until her mother had arrived home with dinner and startled her father at his "lesson".

"Merlin bless, what are you doing, love?" she had cried upon seeing her poor daughter whimpering and crying while her father stood behind her, his hands fastened upon the slender shoulders like a cruel bird of prey, shaking her.

Her father spun around, releasing Holly so suddenly she nearly fell, and only her sudden grab at the edge of the table saved her. "When were you going to tell me, Valina?" he spat.

"Tell you what? I don't understand," the dark-haired witch sputtered in astonishment.

"Don't lie to me, woman!" snarled the irate wizard. "How long have you known she was nothing more than a Squib?" he stabbed an

accusing finger at his cringing daughter, who was backing away, tears streaming down her face.

"I'm sorry, Daddy. I'm sorry, I'll try harder next time."

"Will you now?" sneered her father, giving her a look of profound disgust.

"Leave her alone!" snapped Valina, coming to stand before her daughter, her eyes bright with anger. "She is not to blame for not inheriting the gift, you ought to know that."

His fist slammed down on the table, knocking over the candle. "All those years, all the time I had hoped, all the money wasted . . . on a worthless girl without a flicker of magic! How could you keep this from me, Valina?"

"How could I not?" countered his mistress. "Look at you! You have terrified her out of her wits, damn you! And for what? She is still your flesh and blood, your child, what difference does it make if she has but a spark of magic?"

"All the difference in the world," he had replied coldly.

Holly had felt those words stab her to the quick and she had fled, running swiftly to her bedroom, to throw herself on her bed and cry bitterly into her pillow, while in the kitchen, her parents argued vehemently over her lack of the magic that should have been her birthright.

"I still love her, magic or no . . ."

"Then you're a fool, Valina! I shall not have it said that I sired a magicless freak . . . a worthless Muggle . . ." came the sharp biting reply.

"Is that all you care about, your bloody reputation and your career . . .? You selfish bastard! She loves you and you spit on her. How could you?"

"Pity. I had thought together you and I could create a child that would be a credit to both of our heritages, a sorceress beyond compare, but instead you threw me a cull, Valina Rose Sinclair. A princess, ha! She is no better than a house elf, worse, because at least a house elf has some spellcraft."

"She is your daughter, you bloody unfeeling bounder! Who gives a damn if she has magic?"

"Magic is everything, Valina. I thought you knew that. Why else do you think I stayed beside you all these years? For your pretty face? For undying love?" he laughed harshly. "I stayed because of your talent, sweet witch. And the hope that you had passed it down to your offspring."

"She DOES have talent, you smug bastard!" shouted her mother. "She's a seer, she can see in fire . . ."

She could not hear what her father replied to that, she was crying too hard, his cruel words tearing into her heart like the claws of some vicious beast, and the pain spread through her, burning and throbbing ceaselessly . . .

* * * * *

She opened her eyes with a gasp, the awful throbbing pain pulsing through her with every beat of her heart. Startled, she gazed up and met the amber eyes of a large . . . wolf? She gasped, and cried in terror, "No! Get away!"

Then a lean hand was holding her shoulder and a soft silky voice was saying calmly, "Easy, child. Silver would never harm you. He kept you warm."

"Don't be afraid. He's a good wolf and a friend," spoke another voice, and she turned her head and met a familiar green-eyed gaze as a dark-haired boy came to stand beside her, one hand clutching the silver wolf about the neck. "Hi. I'm Harry Snape. I'm the one who found you in the street. And this is my dad, Severus. He's a Potions Master and a professor. What's your name?"

"Holly. Holly Sinclair," she answered softly. "I knew you would save me."

"You did?" Harry repeated. "How?"

"I saw you in a match flame," she replied. "Sometimes I can See things . . .in fire . . .and I saw you . . .rescuing me . . ." She looked down at the fuzzy green blanket and then back at the tall man and the boy. "But I never saw the wolf here. Is he a pet?"

Silver made a sharp bark of disagreement and for some reason the Potions Master gave her a half-smile.

"Uh . . .not really," Harry said quickly. "He's more like a family member."

Silver whuffed in agreement, then leaped lightly to the floor, shaking himself.

Holly looked at the big animal in alarm. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to insult him."

"It would take a lot more than a mistaken assumption to insult him, child," said Severus, smirking. "He's got a thick hide." Then he examined her again with a quick diagnostic. "How are you feeling? Can you move your fingers and toes?"

"Uh . . .yes, I think so."

"Good. Do so."

Holly obeyed the authoritative tone, wriggling her feet and hands, and Severus nodded in satisfaction.

"Good, you haven't lost sensation or movement from frostbite," he declared. "Can you sit up, Miss Sinclair? I have a cup of tea here that you should try and drink, it will help you warm up."

Holly tried to sit up, but she was too weak, and in the end Severus had to assist her, propping her up with several fluffy pillows. "There. Better now?"

"Yes, sir. Thank you for saving me."

"No need to thank me," he waved off her gratitude, sounding embarrassed. "I could hardly leave you to freeze there in the street."

Holly smiled gratefully. "Thank you. You're nicer than my father."

Severus gave her a sharp look. "How so?"

"Because he would have stepped over me and not even looked back," she replied sadly. "You see, he's the reason I was there in the first place."

"What do you mean?"

"I went to him after . . .after Mum died, because the landlord said he needed the rent otherwise I couldn't live at our flat anymore and I was too young to live alone, but he . . .he said I wasn't his daughter and he didn't know me because I was a . . . Squib child . . ." Holly said, ashamed and miserable. She looked down at her hands to hide the sudden spat of tears. "So you see . . .I had nowhere to go except the street . . .and that's where I've been for two weeks . . .ever since the landlord told me to get out and took whatever was left for the rent money . . ."

Harry stared at her in horror. How could her father just throw her out that way? He wondered.

"Did you tell the landlord that you had nowhere else to go?" Severus asked gently, holding onto his temper by the slimmest of margins.

"Yes, but all he said was, "That ain't my problem, missy. I warned your mum long ago that she was an idiot takin' up with the likes of that one, but she never listened, thought he loved her, poor silly Valina! That one never loved anyone save himself, and anyhow it's money I need, not sappy love stories nor orphan Squibs neither . . ."

and then he told me to go find my father. He knew my father had money and I guess he thought since I was his daughter . . ."

Severus felt his hands clench into fists. "Who is your father? What does he do?"

"He works for the Ministry of Magic, sir. He's a personal advisor to the Minister of Magic," Holly answered promptly. "He's a very important man, my mother always said so."

Severus frowned, trying to recall any advisor in Fudge's cabinet by the name of Sinclair. He had thought he knew every highly placed Ministry official, but he had never heard of any wizard called Sinclair. "I've never heard of any advisor named Sinclair. Perhaps your mother was mistaken and he didn't work directly for the Minister."

"Oh, his name wasn't Sinclair, sir. That was my mum's name and mine. Daddy's name was Malfoy. Lucius Malfoy."

Harry had never seen his father look so gobsmacked in his entire life as when Holly said the name of her father. "Dad? What's wrong? Do you know him or something?"

Severus did not answer for several minutes, struggling to control his temper. I should have known. That's why she looks so familiar. Because she is Lucius's daughter, a love child hidden away in secret. Merlin's bloody hat, this is Lucius' child sitting on my couch. I have the child of my worst enemy in my home. "Yes, I know him. He is a powerful wizard, with connections in the Ministry, from an old pureblood family, we went to school together," Severus answered Harry softly. Then he cast another glance at the girl huddled upon the couch and said quietly, "I am sorry, Holly. You deserve much better for a father."

The little girl nodded. "I know. He doesn't love me because I have no magic. That's why he didn't care if I froze or . . .whatever . . .because I'm worthless . . ." Suddenly she began to cry, soft bitter sobs, her small frame shaking.

Harry gazed at her awkwardly, feeling utterly lost, and he turned and looked at his father. "That's not true, right, Dad? You're not worthless just 'cause you have no magic, right? My grandparents weren't wizards and they were good people."

"Yes, son." The Potions Master murmured, staring at the child weeping for a long moment before reaching out a hand and putting it lightly on her shoulder, unable to bear the heartwrenching sobs any longer. "Hush, child. Don't cry."

It was the touch that did it.

It had been so long since she had felt anyone touch her as if she mattered that she was caught off guard. At first she stiffened, recalling the last time a man had put a hand on her-to shove her back out the door of his fine mansion-but then she realized that this hand was not hard, nor hurtful, but comforting and all at once she needed it more than she had ever needed anything.

And between one instant and the next, she had managed to grasp Severus's arm and pull it towards her, until she rested her head in the crook of it, and she clung to him and wept.

Severus was so startled that he did not know what to do at first.

Then instinct took over and he drew the foundling into his lap and held her, the way he had his own son, and Holly Sinclair Malfoy hugged him close and cried into his shoulder, and the Potions Master patted her awkwardly and rocked her while Harry and Silver watched uncomfortably and wondered what would happen now.

Comfort and Hope

Holly had not been held like this in a very long time, not since before her mother had died. Since before the awful quarrel her father had with her mother over the fact that she was magicless and worthless, at least in her father's eyes. Valina had practically thrown him out of the flat, and he had stormed away yelling that someday Valina would regret her decision to raise a Squib brat, and as of now he was going to have nothing to do with them ever again. He had been quite clear and vocal about it, Holly was sure all their neighbors, of which there weren't many, since the flat they lived in was in an upscale neighborhood, could hear her father's parting words. It had made her feel even worse and she had cried herself to sleep in her mother's arms, after apologizing for her lack of magic until she was hoarse, despite Valina's reassurances that it didn't matter.

It did matter, Holly was old enough to understand that her lack of it had cost her the regard and love of her father and turned her from a princess into . . .a worthless Muggle. Ever since, her neighbors gave her odd looks, of pity and condescension, and they didn't invite Valina over for tea in the afternoons as they once had. Valina had pretended to not care, but Holly knew she must feel hurt and slighted and that too was because of her. Before, Valina had been envied her handsome wizard paramour, and the way he lavished gifts on her and paid for everything without even being asked, and seemed to love her. "You've got Merlin's own luck, Valina Sinclair!" the women had often commented. "Looks like you and the kid are set for life."

Until he had discovered that his precious daughter was a mere Squib.

Things had gone downhill rapidly from there. Valina had used the last of their savings to pay their bills, since Lucius had cut them off the very next day. And then she had gone back to her old job as an experimental potion-maker for St. Mungos, a job where she worked long hours for meager pay and in the end that had killed her, when a potion she had been testing had exploded, it had been highly flammable and it had burned Valina Sinclair to a cinder in five minutes, or so it was said.

"Least she didn't suffer none," commented one neighbor upon hearing the dreadful news. "She always did like playing with fire, first with that toff she shacked up with and then her fool experiments. And look where it got her. Blown away and her brat left behind without a Knut to her name, I'd wager."

Lucius hadn't even bothered to come to the funeral, and Holly had been one of the few mourners at the graveside save for a few co-workers and Mrs. Plum and Miss Aven who lived on either side of them and who had always been kind to Holly, even after they had found out she was a Squib.

Remembering that other awful day made her cry harder, however. And there was a cold little place deep within her that had been born the day her mother had died and that remained still, she could feel it like a stone beneath her heart, cold as ice, that not all the warmth in the world could fill. Except it had thawed a little when Harry had discovered her and a little more now that she was held in the Potions Master's arms.

She had forgotten how good it felt to be held in a pair of strong male arms, safe and protected, and there was a familiar smell of spice and sandalwood about him that reminded her of her mother, who often carried pouches of dried herbs in her robes for potion ingredients, and she buried her head in the linen shirt and breathed in the comforting scent, crying softly.

Severus said nothing, simply holding her and rubbing her back, because he knew there were no words he could say that would assuage the fact that her bastard father had chosen to let his daughter die alone rather than acknowledge her. But he understood the depth of the pain she felt, oh yes, no one understood it better, who had been rejected by his own father for a similar reason. Poor lost little snow girl, out of all the cruel things Lucius has ever done, and they are many, this is perhaps the most heartless. He truly is a soulless bastard, a true Death Eater, who has given himself utterly to darkness, for no one with a shred of conscience or compassion could leave a child, their own or not, to die alone like a stray dog in the gutter.

Harry hugged Silver and wondered when the girl would stop crying, he felt very sorry for her, for she was an orphan too, the way he had once been, before Severus had adopted him. Was it possible to cry forever? Because Holly had been crying for at least fifteen minutes, and Harry couldn't remember the last time he'd cried that way. Except perhaps that time over Silver long ago on that fateful Christmas Eve, when he had gotten into a terrible quarrel with his dad over the big wolf and told Severus he hated him. But that had been mostly from guilt and regret, and this-this was different, the intuitive youngster realized. This was true pain, aching and raw, such as he had never known. Instinctively he flinched from it, yet at the same time he wished he knew how to make her better, but he was at a loss and decided the best thing was to trust his father. Severus knew how to make almost everything better and Harry had faith the older man would mend Holly the way he always had Harry. Dad always knows what to do, and his hugs are the best, they make you feel all warm and fuzzy and like you're the only one in the world who deserves one. Much better than anything she ever got from her own dad, I'll bet. Nobody hugs like my dad, though Silver is a close second.

He leaned his head against the gray wolf's side, and Silver turned and nuzzled him affectionately, then returned to watching the Potions Master and the little foundling in concern.

Raw displays of emotion made the big wolf uncomfortable, because wolves did not feel with the same intensity as humans and though Silver recalled his human ancestry and past, he lived much of the time as a wolf, and most of his reactions were more wolf than human. So he found Holly's grief very disturbing, and wished he could do something to make her stop crying as well. Holly's revelation about her father made Silver long to go and bite Lucius Malfoy several times until he begged for mercy. Wolves have a strong loyalty to their family, and no wolf would ever dream of casting out a pup the way Lucius had. The mere thought made his hackles rise and his lip curl in a silent snarl.

At last Holly's sobs faded into sniffles and eventually ceased altogether. Only then did Severus shift his hold and coax her to sit up. "Here, don't wipe your nose on me, please." He said quickly, handing her a white handkerchief with a Slytherin crest with his initials on it,

Lily had made him a dozen as present long ago and he almost always carried one on him.

"Thank you, sir," Holly accepted the handkerchief gratefully. "I would never do that, I know better," she told him quietly, for both Valina and Lucius had drilled proper manners into her before she could walk. She mopped her face and blew her nose, then just sat there, the handkerchief crumpled in her hand, not knowing what to say.

"How do you feel now? A little better?" he inquired, knowing the cathartic release of tears was necessary for healing.

Slowly, Holly nodded.

"Good. Then perhaps you would like to drink this tea Harry made for you? It should help combat that nasty chill you've picked up." He picked up the cup from the tray and muttered a swift spell to reheat the tepid tea, then handed it to his unexpected guest.

Holly cupped the mug in both hands and sniffed the heady aroma of black tea, nutmeg, cinnamon, and peppermint. The smells brought to mind Christmas when she was little, and had helped Valina decorate their flat with candy canes and cinnamon sticks and baked gingerbread men to give to their neighbors. She sipped the tea slowly, and gave Severus a tentative smile. "It's very good, sir. As good as my mother used to make."

"Drink it all, you need it," Severus urged, shifting slightly, for though the child was small and too thin, she still was a little heavy on his knees.

She obediently finished the mug, wiped her mouth with the handkerchief, and then set it back on the tray. "That tasted incredible. What was it?"

"It's winter spice tea," Harry answered from the recliner, where he had moved while Holly was crying in Severus's arms. "Dad and I always drink it around the holidays. And we eat ginger biscuits with it too. You want some?"

Holly nodded, she was starving, she hadn't eaten anything since yesterday, when she had scrounged some scraps from the back of the Leaky Cauldron rubbish bin. "yes, please," she said, recalling her manners.

"Be right back," Harry jumped off the recliner and disappeared into the kitchen to get the tin of ginger biscuits. Normally his father didn't let him have sweets till after dinner, but since Holly wanted them, Harry knew he was safe eating some too, since guests were privileged at the Snape house.

While Harry was fetching the gingersnaps, Holly slid off Severus's lap and went to sit next to him on the sofa. She felt a little awkward and embarrassed after her outburst, but not so much that she couldn't look the man who had saved her life in the eye. "Thank you again, sir, for saving me. You didn't have to, you know. I'm just a Squib, and . . . I know I don't matter all that much to you wizards." She had learned that over and over during the weeks she had been on the streets, especially when she had tried to find employment, offering to clean or restock the shops in exchange for a meal and a bed. One and all had turned her away, saying they didn't need to give a Squib employment when they could just bind a house elf or had an apprentice or a child to work for free.

Severus's eyes flashed and for one moment the girl shrank away, but then his gaze softened and he said, "I'm not angry with you, Holly, only with the narrow-minded bigoted people who have taught you such nonsense. Simply because you have little magic does not mean you don't matter or that you're worthless."

"But sir, everyone says-"

"Everyone is wrong." Severus stated firmly, and Silver woofed in agreement. "There, you see? Even Silver agrees with me."

Holly bit her lip. She did not want to contradict her rescuer, but her father's face loomed before her, dark with wrath, bidding her to leave before he made her regret she had ever been born, and she blurted, "But my father says without magic I can't be his daughter, so how can

you say being a Squib doesn't matter? He loved me once, before he knew the truth."

Harry had entered the den by then, carrying the tin of gingersnaps, and he set the tin on the table and took a handful before perching on the recliner once more, biscuits in one hand and a glass of milk in the other. He had been wondering much the same thing as Holly and now he waited to see how his father would reply to the girl's statement.

Severus reined his initial response to Holly's innocent assertion that Lucius had loved her once, which was to laugh derisively and say that Lucius had never loved her at all, simply the idea of her. The girl was hurting terribly and he had no wish to add to her pain, let her keep her illusions for now of a loving father, she would realize when she grew older that Lucius' affection had been false.

The issue here was not Lucius, but his teachings, which made Severus want to put a fist through the wall. But he restrained himself and said, in as calm a tone as he could manage, "I want you to pay close attention to me, Holly and you as well, Harry," he added, looking over at his son, who had paused mid-bite with a gingersnap halfway to his mouth. "Lucius believes, like most of the wizarding world, that having no magic, or so little of it that you cannot cast spells, is shameful, and something to be ridiculed and mocked over. But he forgets and so does everyone else, that we wizards are in the minority when it comes to having magic. There are far more people in the world who don't have the gift than who do. What does that mean, you ask? That we ought to be grateful for what we have and not think our magic puts us above anyone. We wizards all came from ordinary humans once and some of us still do, like Harry's mum and myself."

"My mum's parents were Muggles," Harry put in then. "And Dad's a half-blood, his mum was a witch but his dad was a Muggle."

Holly stared at them, amazed, for she had never known anyone who was not a wizard through and through. "Really?"

"Yes. Lily was a Muggleborn witch and my best friend, and I am a half-blood," Severus said. "And we two were the strongest wizards at

Hogwarts, stronger even than those who could trace their pureblood status all the way back to Merlin. Why? No one knows, but some purebloods would tell you that having Muggle ancestry means you're inferior, by that I mean they think they're better than you. But that is a lie. I am living proof of it. It is as much of a lie as the belief that because you're a Squib that you're worthless. Tell me, Holly, what did your mother think of you having almost no magic?"

"She . . . she said it didn't matter if I could cast spells or use a wand," Holly said softly, tears prickling her eyes. "She said I was her little girl always and she loved me no matter what. And she told my dad that too and then she told him to get the hell out of her house."

"Good for her!" Severus said, pleased that there had been one person willing to stand up to Lucius in Holly's life. "That is exactly the way a parent should behave, Miss Sinclair. For your mother loved you, child, not because you had magic or not, but because you were her daughter, and that is what matters. You. Not whether or not you inherited magic's gift. There are plenty of talented, smart, successful individuals out there who have not one drop of magic in their veins, and also plenty of stupid, lazy, and ignorant individuals who have magic and waste it on their own petty pleasures and are a waste of breath." He leaned forward and gazed deeply into Holly's sapphire eyes. "Do you understand what I'm saying? It's not whether or not you have magic that matters, it's what you do with what you have that counts. Now, I can tell just from talking with you for a few minutes that you are a very intelligent and thoughtful girl, one who probably got high marks in school, yes?"

Holly nodded, she had always been at the top of her class academically, until her mother had withdrawn her from school once Lucius had cut them off. Then Valina had homeschooled her. "Yes, sir. I only have to read something once or twice and I can remember it."

"Wow! I wish I could do that," Harry said, a little enviously.

Holly gave him a shy smile. "But you have magic and I don't."

"You both have special gifts and talents," Severus pointed out. "Everyone is special in their own way, Holly, which is the way it should be. For if we were all alike, the world would be a very boring place, no?"

Both kids nodded. Severus gave them an approving glance before continuing his lecture. "That being so, it should follow that Muggleborn, half-blood, Squib, or wizard, we are all equal, with none of us better than another. We wizards have a responsibility to use our magic properly, not to torment those who lack it, or humiliate those weaker or less fortunate than us. There is a rule that used to be taught in all the primary wizarding schools long ago that has since fallen out of the curriculum and which I think ought to be reintroduced."

"What is it, Dad?"

"It is simply this-use your magic wisely and to harm none, for the harm or the good you do shall come back upon you threefold," Severus recited. "The Threefold Rule was a lesson my own mother taught me when I was younger than you two, and I have never forgotten it. It is very similar to another rule invented by Muggles-they call theirs the Golden Rule-do unto others as you would have them do unto you, for as you treat others, so shall others treat you."

"They're almost the same," Holly said.

"Very good! And that is what I want you to see-that wizard or Muggle we share the same basic beliefs, and should therefore be able to set aside ridiculous assumptions and treat each other with compassion, not blind arrogance. Of course, most people don't follow those rules, which is why you ended up where you did, Miss Sinclair."

"Why don't they, Dad?" asked Harry.

Severus sighed. "Because people are selfish and it's easier to see differences than it is to see similarities. Like when people thought all wolves were evil beasts that ate children and hunted them to extinction here. People are easily afraid of differences and are quick to judge. Like they did with Holly, assuming that because she is a

Squib she doesn't matter. But they were wrong," he stressed. "Your father, especially, is wrong, Holly. He is a fool, for he threw away the most precious thing he could ever have, something that is worth more than all the Galleons in Gringotts, or all the spellbooks in the Ministry, or all the power of Merlin's enchanted staff. And do you know what that is, Miss Sinclair?"

Holly shook her head.

"It is you, child. Our children are the most precious things we have and when your father cast you away he lost a treasure beyond price. As I said before, he is a fool, and someday he shall regret what he has done," Snape said, and there was an edge to his voice that had not been there before, and he vowed that one day soon he would make Malfoy regret destroying yet another innocent's life.

"Do you really think so, sir?" Holly asked and in her eyes shone a faint spark of hope. If what Severus said was true, perhaps one day her father would remember that he had loved her and forgive her and she could be his princess again.

"All things are possible, Holly," Severus said, thinking, I'll make him regret almost killing you one day, little one, now that I need not pretend to be a Death Eater any longer. I'll make that smug righteous bastard regret every child he ever harmed and every person he killed simply because he could. I've held back because of Harry, but once he is safe at Hogwarts, I can begin to pay back all the sniveling arrogant dark wizards for all the misery they caused me and everyone else.

The little girl's stomach rumbled then and Harry snickered. "Here, have a biscuit." He thrust the tin at her.

The girl took one, and bit into it, sighing in bliss. It tasted fabulous and before she knew it she had eaten another one and then another.

Severus cleared his throat then, and Holly looked up guiltily, she hadn't meant to act like a pig but Merlin she was so hungry! "Sorry."

"Don't apologize, Holly. I should have given you a proper lunch before now." Severus said quickly, cursing his oversight. "How does chicken soup and a ham sandwich sound?"

"Wonderful!" Holly said, looking at him as if he had offered her a gourmet meal.

"Yum, that's my favorite," Harry said, and shared a smile with his new houseguest.

Severus rose and headed into the kitchen to start making the promised lunch, leaving Harry and Holly alone to get better acquainted.

"I'm glad you found me in Diagon Alley, Harry," Holly said shyly.

"Me too, though I kind of . . . tripped over you," Harry admitted, blushing a bit. "I was thinking about getting a present for my dad's birthday and I wasn't watching where I was walking."

"Lucky for me. I'm sorry I interrupted your shopping though."

"It's okay. Dad can take me back tomorrow to get a present," Harry said. He knew Severus wouldn't mind returning tomorrow to Diagon Alley, since he probably needed to replenish some of his ingredients, and hopefully the beakers and the book would still be available. But if not, he could always pick out something else. Saving Holly had been more important than a birthday present.

Holly looked curiously at Silver, then asked, "Harry, how did you come to have a wolf living here with you? And if he's not a pet, just what is he?"

"He's special, Holly," Harry answered cautiously, knowing he had to be careful what he told her about the big wolf, since only family members could know the truth about Remus Lupin. "I met him three years ago, when Dad and I were on holiday in Yorkshire, in a cottage at the edge of a forest called Wolf Wood . . ."

By the time Harry had finished telling Holly an edited tale about Silver and how he had come to live with the Snapes, lunch was ready and the Potions Master called them into the kitchen.

Both children ate every scrap of the meal, though Severus noted with a rather resigned expression that even starving, Holly had more refined table manners than his own son, she didn't slurp her soup and she was careful not to get crumbs on her nightdress and in short behaved like a little lady of privilege, which was how Malfoy had raised her.

Harry, typical ten-year-old boy, simply devoured his food like a starving wolf, and Severus sighed inwardly and decided he would have to remind his son in private about table manners again. He figured the lecture would take better that way, and he didn't want to create resentment between the two, since he had a feeling that Holly would be staying here for a lot longer than a night or two.

As of yet, he hadn't quite made up his mind what to do about the child, but he knew that he could not send her away, and he was unsure about contacting any authorities about her, since they might insist that Lucius take responsibility for the child, and the last thing Holly needed was her father rejecting her publically for the second time. Of course, that could be a bargaining chip, if it came right down to it, Severus mused. For proper Lucius Malfoy, First Advisor to the Minister of Magic, would not want it made public that he had a mistress on the side and had fathered a magicless child with her, not when he was supposedly happily married to Narcissa with a son, Draco, for his heir. His sterling reputation as a family man and funder of several charities would be shot all to hell were the papers to learn that he had cast his own daughter out to die in the cold. That would give the lie to Lucius' claim that he was a former Death Eater, who had followed Voldemort while under the influence of the Imperius Curse.

But Severus wasn't quite ready to go that route yet, not until he had made certain that Holly was well, she seemed to be sniffing and coughing during lunch, and he knew that hypothermia often brought pneumonia or bronchitis in its wake. I'll have to brew up some Decongestion Drafts and some more Pepper-Up Potion too, I think

she's going to need them. Afterwards, I'll figure out whether or not to inform the Ministry of this. Perhaps I'll discuss it with Minerva and Albus first, see what they think of me possibly raising Lucius Malfoy's love child.

Part of him chuckled wickedly just imagining the shocked looks on his colleagues faces and another part of him gibbered that he already had one child to raise and he didn't know if he could handle another as well, but his conscience whispered that if he didn't take her in, what then would become of her? Some Ministry-run foster home, where she would be secretly despised by any family who took her in? Where she would be made miserable until she ran away, back to the streets to starve or become a hardened criminal, all of her potential beaten out of her by a cruel and unforgiving world?

No. He could not permit that to happen. She had Seen in fire that she would be rescued-that Harry and he would save her from a cold and lonely death, and thus it had happened. He would be damned if he threw that hopeful vision of a future where she could be happy back in her face. I too was once a lost and lonely child, and Lily and her mother saved me from the hell of my father's making and from the Marauders. And that was why, in part, I swore an oath to raise Harry as my own if something happened to Lily. The rule of three at work, and now it would seem that fate has placed yet another orphan lost child in my path, another like myself, who needs someone she can rely on to love and protect and advise her. First Harry, then Silver, and now Holly. Severus shook his head ruefully. Someone up there must be having a good laugh at his expense. This was the last thing he had expected to occur when he had woken up that morning.

It almost made him long for his solitary days as a spy, when his biggest worry was being found out by Voldemort. Almost.

Meanwhile, Holly helped Harry wash up the plates and then Harry offered to show her his room, and Holly followed the older boy down the hall, hoping fervently that she might be able to stay here for awhile, she would prove to Severus that she wouldn't be a burden and perhaps he would let her live here. She tucked that fragile hope inside of her and then she allowed herself to enjoy being in the company of another child her own age, one who did not yell "Dirty

Squib!" at her or push her into the mud and throw rocks and iceballs at her.

Instead, Harry showed her his broom and Quidditch posters and asked if she knew how to play Exploding Snap and Holly spent the afternoon playing cards and chess and it was almost like being back in her flat on Phoenix Terrace when her mother was still alive.

After supper, Severus dosed her with some more potions, trying to stave off a lung infection, and also a Sleeping Draught. Holly took them without complaint, even though they tasted horrid, and Severus sent her to bed early, telling her she needed rest, transfiguring a tissue box into a small bed near the fire in the den.

Once he was sure she was sleeping, he began to compose two letters to Dumbledore and Minerva, informing him of this new circumstance, reasoning he could post them tomorrow, there was no hurry. That done he went to tuck Harry into bed as well, teasing him about not staying up reading under the covers again till dawn.

"Okay, Dad, I'll go to sleep. But can we go back to Diagon Alley tomorrow so I can get you a present?"

"Yes. Now close your eyes and go to sleep, before you're too tired to see straight tomorrow." Severus ordered, smirking. "Good night, Harry."

"Night, Dad." Harry yawned, one hand reaching down to pet Silver, who was lying on the floor next to his bed, as was his wont. "Dad, will Holly be staying here for a long time?"

"That's a possibility. Why? Would you mind if she did?" Severus queried softly.

"No. Just wondering, is all. Although having a girl around here is kind of . . . weird. But she's better off here than with her dad." And it'd be nice to have someone my own age around here to talk to and do things with. Too bad she's not a boy.

"Very true. Now, quit stalling and go to sleep, Harry Snape. We can discuss this more in the morning." Then Severus shut the door and sought out his own bed, never realizing that the winds of fate had shifted once again, due to a certain shopkeeper with too much curiosity and an Insta-Magik camera.

Next: Due to headlines in the paper, Lucius comes to call.

Heartless

The next morning, Harry woke up and padded sleepily into the kitchen just in time to see Severus's owl, Persephone, tapping at the window with the morning edition of the Daily Prophet. Harry swiftly unlatched the window and let the owl inside, she had a coating of snow on her gray barred wings, she was a rare species known as a Northern Gray Forest owl.

The owl perched lightly on his shoulder and whoo-ed quietly, sticking out her leg imperiously for Harry to remove the paper tied to it. "Thanks, Sepphy," he said, removing the paper and giving the owl a light scratch upon the breast. "Sepphy" was what he used to call the owl when he was little and couldn't pronounce Persephone, and the nickname had stuck.

Once the post was delivered, Persephone flew straight to her perch in the corner of the kitchen near the stove and began to preen her feathers free of snow and drink the water and the food Severus always left out for her. Unlike her arctic cousin, the snowy owl, Persephone didn't care much for snow, though she would fly in it if she had to.

Harry gave the owl one last affectionate caress before putting on water for tea and toast in the toaster. He could hear the shower running and knew that soon his father would be coming in to make breakfast, he could cook better than Harry, though he insisted his son learn basic cooking skills.

Harry peeked into the den, which was off the kitchen on the righthand side, and saw that Holly was still sleeping, curled up in a small ball underneath the rosebud-printed comforter. That didn't surprise Harry, she must feel like she was in heaven, sleeping warm in a real bed again.

He couldn't imagine living the way she had for weeks, going from a roof over her head to sleeping on the ground in some cold damp alley or whatever. He had been lucky, he supposed, because even the Dursleys, who favored Dudley pointedly over Harry when he had lived with them for a year, had never thrown him out in the snow to die.

He ducked back into the kitchen, hearing the toast pop up, and quickly slathered two slices with butter and strawberry jam, then settled down to eat them, unrolling the paper and scanning it for anything interesting.

Something interesting leaped out from the first page, declaring in bold screaming green ink: CHILD FOUND HALF-FROZEN IN DIAGON ALLEY BY SNAPE & SON!

And below that was a picture of his father, holding Holly in his arms and Harry beside him.

"Merlin! Wait till Dad sees this!" Harry muttered, staring at the picture. "Wonder who took it?" He hadn't seen anyone come out of a storefront, but then he recalled screaming for Severus soon after he'd discovered Holly and supposed that people must have heard him and someone had cared enough to take a picture and report it to the paper.

He didn't think his father was going to be too thrilled when he saw it, however. Severus tended to loathe the press, and refused any interviews or exclusives if asked by a reporter, mostly because the fewer who knew that his son Harry was really Harry Potter, the better. He had even used a Glamour Charm to disguise Harry's scar somewhat, though the time was coming when he would have to reveal to the wizarding world the truth of Harry's origins. Harry Potter had to attend Hogwarts, Dumbledore insisted upon it, it had been part of an agreement he had made with the professor long ago, when he discovered the truth about Sev's adopted son. Severus's wizard oath bound him to raise Harry as his own, over Dumbledore's protests, but that one thing the old wizard had insisted upon.

Harry didn't much care for the fact that everyone would know he'd been adopted, not that he was ashamed of it, but the truth was he felt more like a Snape than a Potter. Severus had shown him pictures of his parents, but to Harry they were simply that-abstracts of people he couldn't remember. When he thought of his family, he thought of his father Severus and Silver, who had once been the wizard Remus Lupin, his wolf-brother. And his last name had been Snape for so

long that he just couldn't get used to it being Potter, and in fact had begged Severus to tell the Headmaster not to change his name. "I'm a Snape, you made me a Snape, and that's how I want to be known. I know they died for me and all, and I'm glad, but you raised me and . . . I feel like your son, not his. He's just a name to me, but you're my father," he had told Severus a week ago, when the older wizard had explained about attending Hogwarts, and Harry's status as the Boy Who Lived, savior of the wizarding world.

He didn't want to be a hero either, just an ordinary wizard, if that were possible.

He continued reading the article, noting that whoever had taken the snapshot had also told the reporter that Severus was Potions Master of Hogwarts and that he lived somewhere nearby. Severus was fanatical about personal privacy, he had made too many enemies in his days as a spy and hated publicity.

And now his picture and Harry's was splashed all over the front page of the Prophet, and the rest of the article spoke of how the mysterious girl was an orphan who used to haunt the byways of Diagon Alley, according to the shopkeepers, though no one knew her name or where she came from. "I think she's a Squib," Ollivander was quoted as saying. "None of my wands reacted to her when she held them, and that means but one thing, either she's a Muggle or a Squib with barely any magic gift." And since no Muggle would be wandering Diagon Alley, the reporter logically concluded that the girl was a Squib and pondered trying to see what had become of her, presumably Snape, who had the reputation of being reclusive, strict, and brilliant, had brought her somewhere to save her life.

Harry raised an eyebrow at the way the columnist had phrased that. Presumably? What do you think he'd do with her, you stupid git, lock her up and use her for potion ingredients? At least he helped her, which was better than what the rest of you lot did, stood by and watched her starve. And you never even asked her name. Huh! Bleeding bunch of . . . of . . . what's that word Dad uses? I know it . . . ah . . . err . . . bigots, that's it! Just like her father . . . well, maybe not that bad, but still.

The kettle began to whistle, and Harry quickly made himself and Severus some tea-winter spice, of course. The tea was the Potion Master's own blend and Harry unashamedly preferred it to any other kind.

He had just sat down with his cup when Severus appeared in the doorway. "You're up before me? What did you do, stay awake all night? Normally, I have to drag you out of bed on the weekends."

Harry shrugged. "Felt like getting up early, I guess. Here," he pushed a cup of tea and the copy of the paper towards his father.

"Thank you." Severus took the cup and sipped it gratefully. Then he looked down at the paper and swore. "Bloody Merlin's ghost! How did that get in there?"

He scowled fiercely down at the front page, growling about "bloody meddling reporters who could never mind their own business." He shook his head, knowing full well that his private life was now going to become a media circus, and he mentally prepared for some busybody press to come knocking on his door. I should have expected this, though. We did rescue her from the middle of a street in Diagon Alley in broad daylight. People were bound to talk. He lifted his eyes from the paper and looked at Harry.

"Prepare yourself, son. We're probably going to get visited by some reporters, I'd assume. If that happens, just let me handle it and if they ask you any questions, tell them you have no comment or don't know."

"Okay, Dad. Are we still going back to Diagon Alley though? I need to get your present." Harry reminded.

"Yes." Severus answered, though the last place he wanted to go was there, but he was no coward, to run and hide from a little publicity. He rose and started scrambling an egg for a cheese omelet and making a pan of hash browns with onions.

Holly woke to the mouthwatering aroma of potatoes sautéing and eggs with melted cheese and thought she must be dreaming,

because she hadn't smelled anything so good since Valina had died. She closed her eyes and inhaled the heavenly aroma and thought If this is a dream, let me die in the middle of it and never wake up. Saliva pooled in the corners of her mouth and her stomach rumbled loudly, she swallowed hard and opened her eyes, only then recalling where she was and how she had gotten there.

She groaned appreciatively and stretched, then slipped reluctantly from her cozy nest and headed for the small bathroom Severus had shown her last night. She hurried through her washing up, though hot water and a real toilet were luxuries she hadn't had in weeks. But the aroma permeating the air was impossible to ignore and so she quickly scrubbed and then followed her nose to the kitchen.

"Morning, sir. Morning, Harry. Ooh, that smells so good!" she sighed longingly.

"Good morning, Holly. I trust you slept well?" Severus inquired. "How are you feeling?"

"Much better than I was yesterday, sir. And much hungrier!" she added, flushing slightly.

Harry grinned and waved her to a place next to him, there was a place setting already there. "Dad's cooking could bring a dead man back to taste it, it's that good."

Holly laughed, then looked around for the big silver wolf. "Where's Silver?"

"Uh . . .probably hunting," Harry replied, drinking his tea.

"Hunting? Where? Not here, I hope."

"No, he's hunting in his forest, up near Yorkshire."

"But that's kilometers from here!" Holly sputtered, her mouth agape. "How did he get over there?" Then she snapped her mouth shut, feeling like an idiot. "Oh. Magic, right?" Brilliant, Sinclair. Of course by magic, these are wizards, after all. Duh!

To his credit, Harry did not mock her for her obvious blunder, instead he answered, "Yeah, we made it so he could come and go as he pleases, and he likes being independent. He's not like a pet, see? He can hunt for himself, but he's also kind of like my guardian, so he's here sometimes and in Yorkshire sometimes. Most people who see him think he's a big dog, like a Malamute, that's got some wolf in him."

"And we encourage that belief," said Severus, levitating two plates heaped with hash browns and an omelet to them. "Since wolves are extinct over here and we'd be hard pressed to explain how we imported one without rousing all kinds of questions I'd rather not have to answer." He directed a pointed look at Holly.

"I understand, sir." She said, then she dug into her breakfast. The first bite tasted so very good she almost abandoned all the manners she had been taught and bolted her food. But then her early training took over and she forced herself to take small bites and chew and swallow.

Severus set a cup of tea next to her and then served himself as well. For several minutes, there was no sound in the kitchen save the clink and clatter of forks against porcelain and sighs of contentment.

Holly managed to eat half her portion before saying regretfully, "I'm sorry, sir. It was delicious but I just can't finish it."

"Nor should you, child. You haven't been eating properly and too much food could make you nauseous," said Severus calmly.

"Could we maybe wrap it for later?" Holly suggested, wishing she dared eat another bite. But her stomach was now protesting how full it was and she didn't want to ruin the excellent meal by making herself sick.

"No need for that, I'm sure Silver will enjoy the leftovers." Severus informed her.

As if summoned, there was a stirring in the corner of the kitchen nearest the back door, where an old gnawed bone lay, and then the big wolf appeared, shaking himself and panting slightly.

"Oh!" Holly gasped.

"See? Toldja he always comes back," Harry chuckled. "You're just in time for breakfast, Silver. Unless you're too full from hunting."

But Silver shook his head, and padded over to give Severus a rather pleading glance from his amber eyes.

The Potions Master snorted, then gave Holly a questioning look. "Miss Sinclair, would you mind if I gave your leftovers to this big drooling beast here? Before he creates a lake in the middle of the kitchen floor?"

Holly giggled at Severus's wit and also at the indignant look the wolf gave the wizard before nodding her assent.

Severus summoned the plate of half-eaten food and set it before the wolf, who devoured it in a twinkling.

The Potions Master indicated the Daily Prophet lying open before him, and said softly, "It seems we've managed to get ourselves in the paper, and therefore we can probably expect a few reporters to hound us today when we return to Diagon Alley. Harry needs to go back and purchase a birthday present, would you like to come along, Holly?"

Holly considered, then nodded. If she were with Harry and Severus, no one would dare tease or harass her the way they used to when she was a mere street kid. "Yes, sir. I'd like that." Then she added, because she could tell that having his name in the paper annoyed him greatly, "I'm sorry I'm causing you so much trouble, Mr. Snape. I . . . don't mean to be a burden on you . . ." she looked down at the table, her pale hair sliding forward to hide her face, which she was certain was an unflattering shade of scarlet.

"Nonsense, young lady," the professor said gruffly. "You are hardly to blame for the loose tongues of a few gossips. People always talk, even when they know nothing. And Diagon Alley spawns rumors like a dragon breathes fire. So don't blame yourself for this, Holly. It was to be expected, considering where we were when we rescued you."

The little girl nodded, but she still felt guilty for disturbing the quiet peace of the Potion Master's home. Harry had told her yesterday how much Severus liked his privacy and now it was spoiled.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, at another home on a vast estate in the wizarding side of Somerset, Lucius was just sitting down to his morning cup of coffee and croissants, creamed haddock, and eggs Benedict, when a house elf appeared and said, "The morning paper, Master Malfoy," and handed the wizard a copy of the Prophet before vanishing with an audible pop.

Lucius unfolded the paper leisurely, wondering if there were anything worth reading in it. He nearly spewed his coffee all over when he caught sight of the picture on the front page.

"Something wrong, dear?" inquired Narcissa, raising an eyebrow.

Lucius grabbed a linen napkin and dabbed at his lips. "No . . . I just swallowed wrong . . ." he covered smoothly, hiding his shock with the ease of long practice. Hell and damnation! How did SHE come there, and to be rescued by bloody Snape-the filthy traitor-of all people? That was the very last thing he had expected to see on the headlines . . .his Squib daughter being held in the arms of his worst enemy. No one else would ever know that she was his, the likeness was slightly blurred and only those who had known her very well could ever recognize her, but he could feel his gut clenching nevertheless.

He marveled that she had survived after he had sent her packing all those weeks ago, he had been sure she would succumb to the perils of the street, sheltered little thing that she was. Apparently, there was more iron in her than he had thought, and for a single instant he felt a

fleeting mote of pride, but he quickly crushed it. She meant nothing to him, she was flawed, imperfect, and he needed to get rid of her, before anyone made a connection between her and himself.

His political career would be destroyed if word ever got out that he had fathered an illegitimate Squib child, much less abandoned her that way. He didn't think Narcissa suspected he had a mistress, he had always been careful to expunge any trace of Valina upon his clothes or his person before returning to Malfoy Manor. Not that she could do much to him if she had found out, he was perfectly within his rights to seek female companionship, especially since after Draco's birth, Narcissa made it plain she didn't want any more children and they no longer shared a room.

Still, he didn't want friction in his marriage right now and the current Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge, frowned upon infidelity, he liked his advisors to be upstanding pillars of the community and all that rot. So it would not be a good thing if a connection were ever made between himself and Holly Amanda Sinclair.

He forced himself to continue eating breakfast as if nothing were the matter, but all the while his cunning brain was working, considering how best to deal with his little problem child.

* * * * *

Some ten minutes later, Silver pricked up his ears and padded towards the front door of the little house, head lowered, and growling softly.

"Harry? Why's he growling like that?" Holly asked uneasily. She was not used to being around a large canine like this and the big wolf's sudden temper frightened her.

"Uh . . .I dunno," Harry said, puzzled, for he had never heard Silver snarl like that before. "Dad, what's wrong with Silver?"

Severus was on his feet, his wand out and his eyes narrowed. He had seen dogs behave like that before, usually when they smelled

something or someone they disliked. He quickly followed the wolf to the door, all of his instincts screaming of impending danger.

The great wolf had his head lowered and was growling steadily, his amber eyes narrowed in dislike.

Sudden footsteps sounded on the porch and then there came a sharp rap on the door.

Before Severus could open it, the door was nearly blown off its hinges by a shouted, "Alohomora Majoris!" which was a much stronger and advanced version of a standard Unlocking charm.

A tall blond man carrying a snake-headed walking stick wearing gray robes and a finely tailored Italian pearl-gray suit stepped through the door, to be greeted by a set of humungous jaws and a terrible warning snarl.

"Bloody damn hell!" gasped Lucius Malfoy, stepping back hastily from the large predator standing staunchly in the doorway. "Call off your guard dog or whatever it is, Snape!" he ordered. "I have business I need to discuss with you."

"Oh, indeed?" Severus drawled, his voice cold as ice and dripping with sarcasm. "What business would that be, Malfoy? I no longer make deals with the devil, old friend." He sneered that last word with a mocking twist, leaving Lucius no doubt that Severus had nothing but contempt and disgust for his old schoolmate.

Lucius drew himself up, stiffening at the other's disrespectful tone. He poked his cane at Silver, who growled furiously, all of his fur bristling. "Call off this beast, Snape, before I teach it why wizards were born to inherit the earth."

"Silver!" Severus called sharply, laying a hand on the big wolf's ruff and tugging gently. "He's not worth biting, you might catch a deadly disease. Easy now. Go and guard Harry. I'll take care of our unexpected . . . visitor."

Silver resisted, he really didn't like the aura the blond wizard gave off, it was dark with the blood of innocents and stained with the taint of black magic. But Severus pulled on him insistently and repeated his command to guard Harry. Reluctantly, the big wolf backed away, still showing his fangs, and then disappeared back down the hallway to the kitchen, where he stood in the doorway, alert and ready to spring should Lucius attempt to breach the kitchen, where Harry and Holly crouched near the entrance, trying to see who had come knocking at the door.

"What do you want, Lucius?" Severus demanded in a soft dangerous tone. He kept his wand trained upon the Death Eater.

Holly felt a sudden shiver go through her. "Harry, it's my father!" she murmured and felt both shame and hope stir in her. Perhaps he had come for her after all, and repented of his awful behavior.

Harry looked alarmed. "What's he doing here? D'you think he's come to take you away?"

"I don't know. Hush." She ordered him irritably, and strained her ears to hear the adults' conversation.

"You know perfectly well why I've come here, Snape," the other spat, his gray eyes shimmering with a sudden fury. "Where is she? I know she's here, her picture was easily recognizable in the Prophet."

Severus's lips tightened and he said angrily, "Why would you care, Lucius? You left her to die like a dog in the street, to freeze to death on one of the coldest nights of the year. Don't tell me you've suddenly developed a conscience, or some filial feeling. I know better, Malfoy! What little heart you possessed was given long ago to darkness."

"That is none of your concern, traitor!" growled the pureblood. "She belongs to me, to do with as I see fit. Now where is she? Here? Or perhaps you brought her to St. Mungos?"

"She has a name, Malfoy." Severus reminded sharply. "Or perhaps you've forgotten that too. After all she is nothing more than a Squib to you."

"Just so, and I will not allow her to tarnish my reputation. I have worked too hard to maintain it and I will not allow years of work to be ruined by that pathetic useless scrap of a girl!"

Back in the kitchen, Holly trembled, her eyes filling with tears. Her father's cold words struck her like a swordthrust through the heart, filling her with a bitter cold sorrow. I hoped . . .that he would take me home, wherever he lives, but he doesn't want me. He doesn't love me. She wrapped her arms about her middle, feeling suddenly sick to her stomach.

Severus laughed mockingly. "Why, Lucius, can it be you are afraid? Afraid of a little girl? Why? Are you afraid of what people will say? That the most proper pureblooded scion of Malfoy Manor, First Advisor of the Minister of Magic, is really a wicked selfish evil man, who cares so little for his own daughter that he could leave her to starve and freeze alone in the middle of winter! Or is it that you fear that your infidelity will be discovered? Does your wife know of your double life, of the witch you kept in secret who bore you another child? Tsk. Tsk. What would the Minister say?"

Lucius felt himself flush to the tips of his ears, Snape's words stung like a lash. "Shut your mouth, Snape! I don't owe you an explanation for anything! I've come for one thing and one thing only. Now tell me where she is, blast you to hell!"

"No," Severus said silkily, his eyes glittering. "She is somewhere where you will not harm her, Malfoy." Then he added, in a burst of intuition, "Like you harmed her mother."

There was a terrible silence following that statement.

Holly cringed, and Harry just stared at her, his face a mask of disbelief and horror that mirrored her own. No . . .it's not true . . .Mum died in a potions accident . . . An accident! My father wouldn't have . . .he wouldn't . . .!

Then Lucius spoke. "What are you implying, Snape? That I had something to do with Valina's death?"

Severus glared at him. "Didn't you? You see, I remember Valina Sinclair from our days at school. She was a Slytherin, and my mentor in Advanced Potions. Ah, didn't know that, did you? She was an accomplished potion maker, hardly the kind to make mistakes like the one they say killed her. After all, no body was ever found to study."

"Everyone makes mistakes, Snape." Lucius sneered, his handsome face twisting into a rigid mask. "My biggest mistake, besides trusting you, traitor, was taking up with Valina. Her lines were good, but she threw me a misfit."

"You speak of her as if she were a brood mare, Malfoy, instead of your lover and the mother of your child. How cold are you?"

Lucius shrugged. "I never pretended any grand passion for her, Snape. That sort of thing exists only in stories. True love is a farce, fit only for Mudbloods and fools. Valina knew what she was, what I was, and if she chose to make of our arrangement a fantasy, that's too damn bad. For her. I warned her not to cross me. She chose to ignore that warning. Most unwise, Snape."

"You are despicable, Lucius! She was no threat to you, none whatsoever. Did you arrange for her "accident" then?"

"Think what you will, Snape, it matters not to me. Now, for the last time, where is my little Squib child?"

Severus ground his teeth together and glared daggers at the other wizard. "Why do you care, Lucius? So you can arrange for her to have an "accident" too?"

"That doesn't concern you! This is a private matter, Snape, and I'm telling you this once, do not stick your pointed nose into my business, or else!" Lucius declared menacingly.

Behind them in the kitchen entranceway, Silver lowered his head and snarled, low and dangerous, and his amber eyes burned with fury. Oh, how he longed to go and rip out the evil wizard's throat! He had never

wished to do harm to a human so badly as he did then, and it took every ounce of self control he possessed not to act upon that impulse.

"Or else what?" Severus drew himself up to his full height, and his eyes glittered fiercely, like a falcon that has sighted prey. "You don't frighten me, Lucius! You take pleasure in subduing and hurting Muggles, women, and children, those who are helpless and cannot fight back. But I am none of those things, and you need to beware of starting something you cannot finish, Malfoy."

Lucius laughed mockingly. "Do you think you can best me, fool? You would risk your neck in a duel over a mere child-and a magicless one at that?"

"Yes. Because unlike you, I have priorities, and they do not include handing over an innocent to you for you to hurt when you have already hurt her enough! You are unnatural, treating your daughter that way, casting her out to starve like so much rubbish! What would the press say, Malfoy, if they knew what you have done? You, the First Advisor, guilty of arranging your mistress's death and of throwing your own flesh and blood into the street? Your so-called reputation would be destroyed in an instant."

"You dare--!" Lucius snarled, looking ready to cast the Cruciatus Curse on Severus, his gray eyes darkened to almost black.

Suddenly, there came a muffled sob from the kitchen, and then the sound of small feet running. Holly had remained mute with horror, listening to the awful conversation between her father and Severus, and all at once she could bear it no longer. Her mother was dead and it seemed as if her father had actually had a hand in it and worst of all, he did not love her the way a father should love his daughter. She had hoped, upon discovering who it was by the door, that he had repented and wished to make amends, that he would take her in his arms and tell her he was sorry and he loved her no matter what, and she was to come with him and live with him forever. But Lucius's heartless words had shattered that bright daydream all to pieces, and she felt as if her heart were splitting in two.

"Holly? Hey, where are you going?" Harry called, staring at the smaller girl in astonishment.

Holly did not answer, she bolted out the side entrance to the kitchen and into the hall that led to the bedrooms and the bathroom. She could hardly see for the tears that blurred her eyes, and her breath caught in her throat. Mummy, oh I need you, I need you so much! And you're gone forever and it's all his fault! Sick with shame and sorrow, she raced into the bathroom and slammed the door shut and locked it. Then she dissolved into tears, wishing that she had died in the snow that night.

"So. She is here!" declared the blond wizard, his mouth curling in triumph. "Out of my way, Snape! I've come to claim my own!"

"Like hell!" And with that, Severus intoned a Repel Invaders hex that blew the startled Malfoy off his feet and across the yard, to slam up against a tree. "Get off my property, Malfoy! Holly stays with me and you'll not have her ever as long as I'm around. Go back to your fine manor, you heartless bastard, and if you dare to try and harm me or mine, you will find your reputation in shreds faster than you can blink, and the only thing you'll be needing is a burial urn when I'm through with you."

Lucius had not been expecting Snape to react so quickly, and had thus been caught off guard. He had always considered Severus inferior, half-blood and of a lesser social and financial status, and he did not think he possessed much magecraft since he was a Potions Master. He had learned better, to his chagrin. He groaned and shook his head woozily, it throbbed and pulsed like seven hells from being smashed into a tree trunk. He tried to stand, leaning heavily on his serpent-headed walking stick, but his head was spinning. "This isn't finished, Snape!" he rasped, swallowing hard to keep from retching. "I'll be back, you sniveling coward, and then you shall learn why no one crosses a Malfoy."

"I'll be waiting, Lucius." Severus promised. "Perhaps you ought to bring along some friends next time, so you'll have some company groveling in the dirt."

Lucius snarled some choice cuss words, unable to retaliate magically because he was so dizzy he could barely focus two feet in front of him, much less concentrate to cast a spell. The point of his walking stick dug a deep furrow into the earth as the Death Eater stood, wishing Severus devoured by demons and the worthless Squib that had started all this frozen to death and out of his life forever, like her mother. "I'll be back, Snape! And you will rue the day!" he cried in impotent fury.

He turned to make his way down the cracked pavement, wishing he had thought to bring his broom instead of Apparating.

A furry silver streak exploded out of the door, nearly knocking Severus over.

"What the bloody blazes-!"

The Potions Master stared as Silver flew across the lawn in three huge bounds and took a satisfying bite out of Malfoy's vulnerable backside.

"AHHHH!"

Malfoy's shriek of agony could have been heard in Australia.

Silver growled and barked, showing huge fangs.

Lucius stumbled and nearly fell, took one look at the enraged wolf, and decided that he could Apparate after all. He vanished in a flicker of reddish light, before Silver could attack again.

"Silver!" cried Severus. "Get your blasted behind inside right now! What if someone saw? You could start a panic!"

The big wolf shook his head, then trotted up the steps obediently, a smug look in his expressive amber eyes. Ha! Guess I showed him!

Severus snorted, muttered something about Gryffindors, then gave the proud animal a grudging smile. "Guess I can't blame you,

though." He followed the wolf inside, shutting the front door securely after him.

Then he began to cast every safety ward and protective spell he knew over the house and the property. He was taking no chances with the safety of the children.

He had just finished casting a scramble charm over the fireplace to prevent any unauthorized Floo entry when Harry called from the hallway, "Dad! Come quick! Holly's locked herself in the bathroom and she won't come out."

Severus shook his head, Silver whined, and then the Potions Master went down the hall to where Harry was standing, and put a hand on his son's shoulder. "Harry, did you two happen to hear what was discussed before?"

His son nodded. "Yeah, and Holly said that man was her father, but he sure don't act like one. Did he really kill his own wife?"

"Hush! You don't want to upset Holly anymore than she already is," Sev reprimanded. "I believe he did, but without proof I cannot accuse him. Don't worry about him, Harry. I've made sure he can't harm you." At least for now. Tomorrow I must see about fashioning some amulets of protection for them. He put an arm about Harry and hugged him. Harry leaned into his embrace.

Behind the door, they could hear Holly wailing and Harry winced and said, "Dad, can you unlock the door?"

"Yes." Severus pointed his wand and a blue ribbon shot out and wound about the doorknob. An instant later, the lock opened with a snick.

"Holly? Are you okay?" Harry called worriedly.

The only sound that came from the bathroom was a muffled wailing and sobbing. Harry gave Severus an awkward look, and the Potions Master motioned him to stand aside while he opened the door and entered the bathroom.

The little girl was curled in a ball in a corner inbetween the toilet and the tub, her hands covering her face, her small frame shaking with the force of her unutterable grief. Tears tinged an odd pink color dripped from between her clasped hands.

"Holly? Child, look at me." Severus said, kneeling down next to the girl. "He's gone, he'll never hurt you like that again."

Trembling, she lowered her hands and Severus gasped. Long scratches covered her cheeks like fiery brands, and blood trickled from them, mixing with the tears on her cheeks. " . . .his faceI have his face . . ." she sobbed incoherently. She made as if to scratch at herself again, her little hands crooked into claws.

"Stop! Holly, stop!" Severus ordered, aghast. He caught her hands in his own. "Don't. Don't hurt yourself because of him."

She struggled, weeping. "I hate him . . .he killed my mother . . .I know it . . .And I'm part of him . . .!"

"I know, but listen. Listen to me," Severus ordered sharply, shaking her gently. "You may have his blood, and you may have his face, but that does not make you him. You are your own person, Holly Sinclair, and a far better one than he will ever be."

She shook her head. "No . . .I'm not . . .or else he would love me, like other dads love their daughters."

"Little one, Lucius doesn't love you because he is incapable of loving anyone. You shouldn't blame yourself because he is a heartless beast. You are more than worthy of being loved."

"How do you know?"

"Because your mother loved you, Holly, and she was a fine judge of character. I knew her well, she was my mentor when I was a student. And I can tell that you are like her, child." Severus said earnestly, looking right into her eyes. "Like her, not him."

"But . . .I look like him . . .I don't want to look like him . . .!" she wailed, trying to free her hands from Severus's grasp.

"Shhh . . .come here . . ." Severus pulled her into his arms, holding her firmly against him. "You could never be like him . . .you are pure and good and innocent . . .hush . . ." He pushed her head down against his shoulder, rubbing her back and hugging her.

She stopped fighting him eventually, allowing herself the comfort she so badly needed, putting her head down and crying heartbrokenly into his shirt.

And Severus held her, cursing the heartless wizard who had sired her to the depths of hell, and wishing he could do more to help her. Poor broken child, you need more help than I can give. A Mind Healer, perhaps, might be able to rid you of the inferiority complex he gave you and restore you to yourself. I'll have to see about setting up an appointment with a therapist. Luckily, he happened to know a very good one, Healer Keegan had helped him with his own nightmares after he had retired from his duties as a spy for the Order of the Phoenix, when he suffered from flashbacks of the horrors he had witnessed and the deaths he had been unable to prevent. Perhaps Susan would also be able to help Holly.

At last her sobs died to sniffles and Severus cautiously sat her up in his lap. "Let's put some salve on those scratches, all right?"

Holly nodded dully, she felt hollow inside ever since Lucius had come, it was as if his coming had smothered all the happiness and warmth within her.

"Harry, fetch me the quick-healing salve, please," Severus instructed.

Harry obeyed immediately, glad to have something to do. He went into Severus's potions store and fetched down the container of salve. "Here, Dad." He handed the Potions Master the jar, then turned to Holly and said, "That salve is great, it doesn't sting and it heals up cuts in like an hour. Dad invented it, and I've used it loads of times."

Holly nodded, giving him the barest flicker of a smile.

"Look at me, child," Severus gently tilted the girl's face towards him and smoothed on the creamy golden salve.

Almost instantly, the stinging pain and bleeding stopped and Holly sighed in relief.

"Better, yes? Good. Now, I want you to promise me something."

"What?"

"That you will not try and harm yourself again. If you feel angry or upset, come and find me and we can talk about what's bothering you, or you can hit a pillow or something and pretend it's your father, but do not scratch yourself this way again, understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Promise me."

"I promise."

"Very good. Also know this, you will always have a home with me and Harry. We do not care if you are a witch, a Squib, or a Muggle. Here you are simply Holly and we love you for who you are, not what you are."

She gaped at him in astonishment. "Do you . . . really mean that, sir?"

"I do. And you may call me Severus if you wish, you are not a student, to have to 'sir' me all the time."

She gazed up at him, and in her sapphire eyes, so like Valina's, flared a kernel of hope. "Thank you, sir. I . . . I mean Severus," she corrected, flushing. "I'm sorry to bring you so much trouble."

"Do not be. You are not to blame for your father's unreasonable irrational attitude and arrogance. He brings trouble upon himself, by being what he is."

"Do you think he meant what he said, Dad?" Harry asked abruptly. "About coming back here?"

Severus sighed. "He may have, Harry, but he'll find a poor welcome if he does. Between my wards and Silver, you will be quite safe."

Harry giggled suddenly. "Holly, you shoulda seen it. Silver . . . ran outside and he . . . bit your father right on the bum. Hard!"

Holly's eyes grew wide. "Really?"

Harry nodded, sniggering. "Yeah and he screamed like a . . . coward," he told her, substituting the word "coward" for "girl" just in time.

Holly looked pleased. She looked over at Silver, who was standing in the doorway, and gave him a thumbs up sign. "Good old Silver! Too bad I missed it."

"I'm sure Silver will be happy to repeat it, should Lucius come skulking around again," said Severus, a note of profound satisfaction in his voice.

Silver yipped an affirmative and wagged his tail slightly.

"All right then, why don't you . . . get dressed, Holly?" suggested the Potions Master awkwardly, only then realizing that Holly was still in her nightgown. "We should go to Diagon Alley soon, before it becomes crowded. We'll leave as soon as you're presentable, Holly."

The little girl gave him another hug before standing up and saying, "I'll hurry, don't worry." As she turned to leave she whispered, over her shoulder, "I wish you were my real dad, Severus. And Harry my real brother."

Then she was gone down the hall to put on the clothes Severus had transfigured for her the night before, which were a pair of jeans, a soft pink sweatshirt and sneakers with pink stripes.

Behind her, Harry murmured, "So do I."

Severus blinked at him in astonishment. Then he smiled and said quietly, "I as well, son. Go and put on your coat, we'll be leaving soon."

Well, how did you like this one?

Next: More trouble occurs at Diagon Alley as some bullies try and torment Holly.

Diagon Alley Disaster

Severus hastily fashioned two temporary Charms of Protection, made from two green ribbons, they were enchanted to prevent any dark wizard from touching or Apparating away with the children, for though he had sent Lucius fleeing with his tail between his legs, he knew the Death Eater was not beaten so easily, and would be back to stalk them, or hire it done. Hiring, the Potions Master reflected, was more his style, for the aristocrat rarely dirtied his manicured hands with killing. Unless ordered to by his dark master or bored, Severus thought sourly. But the charms would protect the children until he could fashion more permanent ones tomorrow. He bound one about Harry's wrist and the other in Holly's hair.

Soon they were Flooing to Diagon Alley, stepping out of the fireplace of the Three Broomsticks. Severus nodded to several of the patrons, who cast him curious glances, but none of them accosted him. He beckoned to the two children and whispered in their ears, "I want you to stay near me, we're going to go shop for a few clothes for Holly first, and then Harry, you can go and shop for my present, while I browse in the bookstore. And after, assuming we aren't trailed by a hundred annoying reporters, we can have lunch. How does that plan sound?"

"Good," Harry said, he wasn't too thrilled with clothes shopping, but he knew that Holly needed clothes desperately, and so he didn't protest.

"Very good. But sir, I mean Severus, y-you don't have to take me shopping." Holly stammered. "You could just . . .uh . . .magic my clothes into different outfits."

"Holly, it takes more energy to "magic" your clothes-as you put it-than it would to simply buy you them," explained Severus. "Come, you may pick out ten outfits and some night clothes and underthings. And shoes as well."

Severus took her to a small store called Tasha's Togs, which was less expensive than Madam Malkins or Twilfit and Tatlers, and catered especially to young witches without much money, selling

affordable decent clothing in current styles. The proprietress, Tasha Miller, came herself to greet them, she was a former student of Severus's. "Hello, Professor Snape. Uh . . .are you looking to buy a gift for a niece or . . .or . . ." she floundered, knowing quite well that Severus had no daughter, only a son named Harry. She was tall with dark blond hair in a twist and a soft flowing crimson shirt, black pants and a multi-colored scarf wound about her waist, she looked to be about twenty-three.

"Actually, I was hoping to have your assistance in outfitting my ward, Holly," Severus said calmly, indicating Holly standing next to him. Holly looked up at the tall witch and gave her a shy smile.

"Hi, I'm Tasha! Come this way, what kinds of colors do you like? With your hair color, I think you'd do well with mostly pastels and a few dark indigos and royal purples and emerald greens too. . ."

Harry and Severus waited near the shop entrance while Tasha competently helped Holly pick out ten outfits and night clothes and underwear. Holly was extremely easy to please, and Tasha soon had her well in hand, whispering when they were far enough away that she was so lucky living with Professor Snape. "Y'know, I had the biggest crush on him when I was in his class," Tasha confided with a little chuckle. "The way he looked in that black robe . . .and his voice . . .gave me goosebumps just listening to him read out instructions. I used to think about getting detention just so I could be alone with him, but of course I never dared . . ." She flashed a glance at the tall man and sighed dreamily.

"Really? He's very nice to me," Holly confided. "He knew my mother, she tutored him in Advanced Potions."

Tasha arched an eyebrow and giggled. "She must have had fun doing that, I'll bet. Anyway, all you need to do is pick out shoes and you're done. Least for the winter." She gestured to the racks of shoes and boots. "But then you get to come back in the summer, I hope, and check out my summer line, okay?"

Holly agreed, she liked the other witch, who did not sneer at her, nor did she seem to recognize her as the Squib Snape had rescued featured in the Prophet.

Once Holly's purchases were complete, Severus paid for them and then shrunk them to fit inside his pockets. "And now, we can go over to the apothecary so Harry can pick out a present."

They followed him out of the store and across to the main street. Unfortunately, they came out near the Leaky Cauldron, which was right next to the Daily Prophet offices, and as soon as the reporters caught sight of Severus, they descended upon them like a flock of seagulls upon a dead fish.

"Mr. Snape, what prompted you to rescue a Squib child from freezing?"

"Professor, is it true that you wrapped her in your own cloak in order to keep her warm?"

"Did your son fall on her, was that how you discovered her in the snowdrift?"

"What will become of her now that you have rescued her? Have you discovered her identity? Is she an orphan?"

"Would you be willing to do an interview along with your son for my column?"

Severus gritted his teeth, feeling as if he were being mobbed by about a dozen buzzing bees, all of them talking and shoving quills in his face. Harry and Holly hid behind him, and prayed they went unnoticed.

Severus cleared his throat and said sharply, "One at a time, if you will!" he whirled upon the first reporter to question him, a rather fat balding man with a black camera about his neck. "I rescued her because she was dying, if you must know, and it wouldn't have mattered if she were a Squib or a wizard, she was a helpless child,

and didn't deserve to die like a stray dog alone." He gave the reporter a scintillating glare.

The reporter gulped and backed off and Snape whirled upon the others, glowering like a falcon who has seen a large flock of sparrows.

Just then, one of the reporters spotted Harry crouched behind Severus and yelled, "You're the professor's son, aren't you? Tell me, what was your first thought upon coming across this girl frozen in the snow? Were you scared? Disgusted? Shocked? Inquiring minds want to know."

Harry backed away, grabbing Holly and pushing her along with him. "Err . . . I don't know, it all happened so fast . . ."

Severus stepped in between the reporter and his son. "Leave the boy be, you interfering vulture! I'll answer your questions. Harry, go and shop for your present with Holly."

Harry heaved a sigh of relief and scrambled away, Holly following.

Behind them, they heard a voice cry, "Look, there she goes! The snow girl!"

"C'mon, quick! Before they try and interview you too," Harry beckoned, and Holly began to run after the slight wizard.

People frowned at them, but made no move to stop them as they rushed down the street and into the safety of the apothecary.

Harry breathed a humungous sigh of relief as they entered the apothecary, which was blessedly quiet and smelled delightfully of cinnamon and other spices. "Phew! Thought for a minute they were gonna follow us like a pack of hounds."

"What about Severus? We left him there," Holly said, twisting her hands nervously in her shirt.

"He'll be all right. Dad will have them shaking in their boots in five seconds, I'll bet," Harry laughed. Then he glanced around the shop,

heading for the shelf where the beakers were stored. "I hope they still have the beakers and the potions book I saw in here last time."

"Before you tripped over me?" Holly queried.

"Uh, no, I was here with Dad last term and Mr. Theovar had a brand new set of glass beakers with silver stoppers that would label themselves when you poured a potion into them. And there was a book of rare potion recipes that Dad was eying too, but he never buys himself stuff like that, and I saved my allowance for months so I could maybe get both." He shook a large pouch pointedly.

Holly looked about at the shelves full of bottled herbs and powders and more plants hung in bunches from the ceiling and in baskets. There was a row of small cauldrons and stirrers and a section of mortars and pestles and sharp knives for skinning and chopping as well as thin mesh cloths, aprons, gloves, and masks for protecting one's clothing and oneself from harmful potion fumes. There were row upon row of containers and jars, measuring spoons and bowls, anything one might need to make elixirs and drafts.

"My mum would have loved this shop," Holly murmured sadly. She sniffed and dashed a tear from her eye. Then she glanced about and said, "I wish I could get Severus a present too. How old will he be, Harry?"

"Uh . . .he'll be thirty. Same age as my real parents were when they died." He reached into his pouch and handed her a few Knuts and Sickles. "Here. If you want, you could go into the stationary store, it's right down the street from here. Dad could always use some new quills and parchment, and this ought to cover it."

"Oh, but I couldn't . . .that's your money . . ."

"Yeah, so what? Here, I should have enough to get my present, take it." He shoved the money at her.

She took it, finding she wasn't too proud to accept money if it was for a birthday present. "I'll . . .I'll pay you back, Harry. Thanks."

Harry blushed. "Aww . . .don't worry about that, Holly."

She tucked the money in a pocket of her coat, then said, "I'll be right back. It shouldn't take me too long to pick out a nice quill and some ink and parchment."

Harry nodded, then turned to peruse the beakers.

Holly reached Scribbulus' Everchanging Inks in two minutes, recalling lingering here when she was searching for work after being thrown out of the Malfoy mansion. But the owner of the stationary store had refused her offer of employment once he discovered she was a Squib, like so many other shopkeepers, and had told her to clear out, that he didn't support charity cases and magicless folk.

She swallowed, reminding herself that she wasn't a street brat anymore, but a paying customer, and squared her shoulders and entered the shop. Several other wizards and witches were inside, examining the wide array of quills and inks and reams of parchment.

The store was divided into three sections-paper, pens, and ink. Holly headed over to the quills first, she had always loved stroking and holding her mother's quill pens when she was small, and Valina had taught her to write with one before she was five. She had a particularly fine pure white swan's feather, capped in gold with blue glitter dusted on it that she had used to write down her potions recipes. Holly had to sell it along with the rest of her mother's possessions to the landlord for the rent.

Recalling that quill made a lump come to her throat. I'm sorry, Mum, that I had to sell all your stuff, if I'd been born with magic it would have been different. I'm sorry I was such a disappointment.

Her hand reached out to caress a large peacock feather quill, it was far beyond her means, but she could picture Valina writing with it. She smiled sadly. Then her eye was caught by a slender quill that was silver edged with black. She read the tag.

Peregrine Falcon Quill, 3 Sickles. This quill has been enchanted to write legibly on any surface, including glass, and is especially good for labeling potion jars and beakers.

Holly's face lit up. That quill was perfect for Severus. She picked it up, it came in a small wooden box, and then she turned to examine the ink and parchment section. A sign beside the parchment section proclaimed there was a sale on white sheepskin, grade two parchment, suitable for writing grimoires and spellbooks.

She began to make her way towards the shelf where the sale reams of parchment were and bumped into a group of young witches and wizards.

"Hey, watch where you're going!" cried one, a girl wearing expensive blue robes.

"Sorry," Holly apologized, feeling herself flush.

Then she froze for she recognized some of the boys, they were ones who had chased her and threw dirt and rocks at her. Before she could turn and leave, one of them, a dark-haired twelve-year-old, spotted her and sneered, "Well, look who it is! Hey, Squib girl, what are you doing in here? You don't have magic enough to hold a wand, much less write down spells."

The others snickered and whispered behind their hands.

Holly felt herself go red and longed to make herself vanish. "Hey, what's that you're holding?" demanded the first girl.

"It's a gift. Now leave me alone!"

"A gift? Who would want a gift from you?" the girl laughed nastily. "A dirty Squib! They might catch a disease."

More laughter followed that remark.

"How are you gonna pay for that, anyway?" asked the first boy, whose name was Carl Young. "You're a beggar and a garbage picker."

"I am not!" Holly said, trying to sound confident. "I have money." She patted her pocket.

"Oh yeah?" said another, a stocky blond boy called Jessie Tull. "Where'd you get it? Pick somebody's pocket, huh?"

"No! I'm not a thief!" She turned to leave, but Jessie grabbed her arm.

"Not so fast, Squib! If you stole that money, it's only fair you share it . . .with the rest of us."

"No!" she struggled to free herself, but the boy was quite strong. "I didn't steal it, now leave off!"

"Make me!" he grinned nastily, and groped for her pocket.

"Let me go!" Holly cried, frightened. She kicked out at the boy, her foot connecting with his shin.

"Oww! Why you little doxy!" he swore. "I'll teach you to respect your betters" He lifted a hand.

The others began to cheer.

"What's all this ruckus?" demanded the shopkeeper, coming to investigate. "You kids better clear out if you're not going to buy anything"

"Sir, I am going to buy something" Holly began, still trying to free her arm from the bigger boy's grasp.

"Liar! She's stolen my money, make her give it back," cried Carl, smirking.

The shopkeeper glowered down at her. "Is that true?"

"No! I came in here to buy a present for my . . ." she stammered, uncertain what to call Severus. Was he her guardian?

"Wait a minute! I know you, you're the Squib who came looking for a job a few weeks back," said the owner, his eyes narrowing. "Don't tell me someone actually hired a street brat like you. Give me that quill and whatever money you have in your pockets, girl! We don't take to thieves round here, now turn out your pockets!"

"But it's my money, sir! I came here to buy a present for Professor Snape," Holly protested.

"Oh, sure y'did!" mocked Carl. "Like Snape would ever give you the time of day. You're nothin' but a thief and a liar."

The owner leaned down and said sternly, "Give back what you took from this gentlemen here and I won't summon the Aurors, girl!"

Holly felt tears come to her eyes. "I'm not a thief! It's my money, you can ask the professor!"

"You have five seconds to give back whatever you've got in your pockets," the shopkeeper ordered.

Carl and Jessie sniggered, their eyes glowing with delight and suddenly Holly was angry. She never would have been treated this way if her mother were alive, or Severus were with her. "No! They're the thieves, not me!" Then she stomped hard on Jessie's foot.

The boy howled and released her arm and Holly threw herself flat on the ground and wriggled through the shopkeeper's legs, making a run for the door.

"Get her!"

"Stop, thief!"

"Just wait till I catch you, Squib!"

Holly ran, desperate to escape, wanting only to find Severus or Harry. She bolted out of the shop, still clutching the quill to her, her heart slamming crazily in her chest. She needed to hide, but where?

She practically slammed right into Harry, who was just coming up to the store to meet her, he had finished his purchases and was happy he had gotten exactly what he had wanted for Severus' birthday. "Oh! Harry, they think . . . I mean . . ." she was stuttering so badly she could hardly speak, her eyes wild and frightened, like that of a hunted animal.

"Holly, what's wrong?" Harry asked softly.

She opened her mouth to reply when the door to the shop burst open behind her and the gang of troublemakers who had been harassing her plus the shopkeeper came outside.

"Ah ha! There she is-the dirty Squib!" crowed Jessie. He latched onto Holly's shoulder, a nasty gleam in his eye.

"Hey! You leave her alone!" Harry cried, furious. He hated bullies and he sensed that this boy was one of the worst. "Get off her, what's she done to you?"

"She stole money from somebody and she's a Squib, that's all y'need to know!" yelled the shopkeeper.

"That's a lie, Harry! I only have the money you gave me!"

"Who'd give a scummy Squib like you money, girlie?" sneered a tall girl.

"I would. And I did. Holly's no thief," Harry defended the little girl staunchly. He glared angrily at the other kids. "Now leave off, will you? You got no right to treat her like this."

"Who the bloody hell are you, to tell me what to do?" snarled Jessie.

"The name's Snape. Harry Snape." Harry replied, feeling his temper start to spike. "Now, for the last time . . .let her GO!"

"And if I don't?" mocked the older boy. "You gonna run and tell your daddy? Bet he won't like to hear you've been defending no-account lying scummy Squibs."

That did it. Harry reached out a hand to try and drag the other boy's hand off Holly, bending a finger back.

Jessie yelped and released Holly, only to take a swing at Harry.

Harry ducked, but not quite fast enough. The other's fist caught him on the lip and he hissed as his lip started to swell and bleed a little. But he shook off the pain and slammed the other kid with his own right hook, catching him in the nose.

The other boy howled, blood spurting and charged Harry, knocking him down.

The other kids watching began to scream, "Fight! Fight! Go to it, Jessie! Teach the little Squib-lover who's boss."

The two rolled on the ground, kicking and pummeling like two wild things.

Suddenly, one of Jessie's friends decided to join in, since Harry was winning, and put out a foot and tripped Harry.

"You rotten cheating git!" screeched Holly, furious at the underhanded trick, and then she forgot she was afraid of the bigger boys and jumped on Carl's back, her tiny fists pummeling and yanking at the bigger boy's hair and head.

"Owww! Get off, you damn little brat!" Carl yelled, reaching back a hand to pull Holly off him.

Dangling in the air, Holly was helpless to dodge the slaps and blows of some of the other young witches and wizards, all of whom bore extreme prejudices against Squibs and were quite willing to take advantage of her predicament.

It was then that the shopkeeper, perhaps fearing a lawsuit, decided to intervene, and broke up the fight between Harry and Jessie and by extension Holly and her tormentors as well. "All right, enough! Break it up and go home!" he bellowed, and the others groaned but quickly left the scene of the crime. "Come along, you two troublemakers! I'm going to Floo call your father, Mr. Snape, we'll see what he has to say about your unseemly behavior."

Harry wanted to tell the man to go bugger himself, he was so mad, but he knew it would only get him in more trouble, so he said instead, "You don't need to Floo him, he's here. Talking to the press."

"Oh? Yes, I think I did see something in the paper this morning about him rescuing a child."

"That child was me!" Holly put in, though her words came out garbled because she had a fat lip and a bloody nose. She was a mess, her face bruised, her hair limp about her face, her new clothes had dirt and blood all over them.

"As for you-you're going to pay a visit to Auror Headquarters, and we'll see about punishing you for your thieving ways. Figures, you're no better than you ought to be!"

"She's not a thief!" Harry objected, talking slowly because he too had a split lip. "I gave her money to buy a quill, you stupid, bigoted . . ." he trailed off at the man's look of utter disbelief and fury.

"No? Then how did she come by this?" He indicated the quill in the box on the ground, miraculously it had not been damaged in the scuffle. "That is a quill from my store-unpaid for!"

"I-I never meant to bring it out here, sir!" Holly sniffled. "I was going to buy it and was looking at some paper when those kids saw me and started picking on me."

The shopkeeper snorted. "A likely story. Tell it to the Aurors." He began to haul the two children down the street, scowling.

Just then Severus happened to be coming that way, figuring his son and Holly were done with their little expedition and wanting to eat something. He had finally managed to ditch the "vampire press" as he liked to call the Prophet reporters, because they sucked the life out of a story and out of a person's personal life, like a vampire sucked blood from a victim, without mercy or conscience. His eyes widened in shock as he beheld his son and Holly, in the grip of an irate wizard, both of them looking like they had been thrashed within an inch of their lives.

"Harry? Holly? What in Merlin's holy name happened to you?"

"Dad!" Harry cried, struggling a bit in the shopkeeper's grip. "Tell him to quit calling Holly a thief. He insists she stole a bloody quill from him and money from some stupid snot, when it's not true!"

Severus's eyes narrowed. "Let my son and my ward go, Mr.-?"

"Stibbons," said the shopkeeper stiffly. "Mr. Snape, if I let this . . . pickpocket go, she will vanish into the streets like a typical Squib. And it is not my policy to let a thief roam free."

"I assure you, she will not run off," Severus said silkily, fixing Stibbons with a sharp glare. "Will you, Holly?"

"No, sir. Why should I? I didn't do anything. Except go into a shop with money and get branded a criminal." She sniffed and then lifted her head proudly, reminding Severus eerily of her father.

"Start at the beginning, if you will, Miss Sinclair." Severus said, ignoring the sputtering of Stibbons, who was clearly shocked he would ask a youngster's opinion first, especially a Squib's.

Holly did, and by the time she had finished, and Harry had added his own version of events, Severus was hard put to control his quicksilver temper. "You have something to add?"

"Well, I've seen her before, Professor Snape, hanging around my shop," began Stibbons, in a servile whine. "Asked for a job once, she did, but I don't hire the likes o'her. Just ain't done, hiring Squibs. Then

she shows up with a pocketful o' money, when she was beggin' for scraps before, what was I to think? And one of the other kids accused her o' stealing, and it seemed likely, so I was going to take her to the Aurors and let them deal with her like she deserved."

"Oh, were you?" He gave Stibbons a glare that made the other wizard blanch and take several steps backward, then said, inbetween gritted teeth, "You have persecuted this child for no other reason than that she bears little magic, just like the majority of wizards here. You disgust me, all of you! Because of people like you, this girl nearly died, frozen to death in the street! A little girl who had done no harm to anyone save been born without the gift of magic. And for that she is treated like dirt and paid no more heed than a stray cur. Your bigotry is shameful and I will not tolerate it. This child is under my protection, and I shall assume responsibility for her actions. You have no right to accuse her without proof."

"B-but . . .she stole a quill from my shop!"

"Unintentionally," Severus interjected. "Holly, pay the man. How much for it?" The obsidian eyes narrowed. He picked up the box with the quill and opened it, examined it briefly, and set it back in the box. "And be warned, I know the proper price for a quill of this kind, so don't think you can cheat her."

Stibbons sputtered but in the end named a fair price for the quill and the ink Holly had chosen as well. Holly paid him, and Stibbons took the money grudgingly. "Pleasure doing business with you," he added stiffly at the Potion Master's warning glower. He knew better than to cross the renowned Severus Snape-renowned for his duties as spy for the Order of the Phoenix and also a combat master. "Good day to you."

Then Stibbons marched back to his shop, stiff with indignation, muttering under his breath about Squib-lovers.

Severus shook his head at both children and said, "Well, we cannot go out to lunch looking like this, so we shall go home, and there we will have a very long talk about fighting, for you both ought to know better."

"We're in trouble for defending ourselves?" Harry cried.

"Enough, Harry. We shall discuss this at home," Severus said sternly, and Harry quieted. He knew better than to cross Severus when he used that tone. "Take my hands, both of you."

The two obeyed and Severus Apparated back to his home, all of their pleasure in the recent outing spoiled.

* * * * *

Once he had fixed up the various scrapes and bruises the two had obtained, he led them into the kitchen, where he proceeded to lecture them sternly about the value of keeping one's temper and seeking alternatives to using their fists.

"But Dad, we were provoked," Harry argued.

"I am aware of that, Harry, nevertheless, you should have come and gotten me, not started a brawl with another boy. You know my rules about fighting, young man."

Harry dropped his eyes then. "Yes, sir. Sorry, Dad." He sighed gustily. "How long am I grounded for?"

"A week should be sufficient. That goes for you as well, Miss Sinclair." He frowned at Holly, who nodded and lowered her eyes as well. "You will also write for me a two foot essay on how you could have avoided this whole altercation and go to bed early tonight, after supper. Harry, your grounding also includes no flying." His son groaned, but didn't protest, knowing it was deserved. He turned to Holly. "If you had a broom, I would also restrict you, but since you do not, you will be doing clean-up with me in my lab for two hours a day."

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry, sir." Holly apologized, swallowing sharply to keep from crying. The Potion Master's disapproval stung her worse than a thousand switches.

"Sorry is all well and good, but you must learn control over your emotions, both of you. Now, off with you. Begin your essays, I will call you in an hour for lunch." Severus dismissed them.

They headed straight for Harry's room, where Harry handed Holly a quill and parchment and shared half of his large desk, so they could both write their essays at the same time. Holly looked down at her blank parchment and mumbled, "I'm sorry, Harry, for getting you in trouble."

"What?" Harry lifted his nose from his parchment and stared at her. "It's not your fault. Those dumb gits started it, not you. And Stibbons too."

"But if I'd stayed with you, none of this would have happened. I know what they think of me."

"Hey. You ought to be able to go into any shop in Diagon Alley and not have to worry about somebody calling you a thief or starting a row with you. You shouldn't need to be my shadow."

"I know. But I'm a Squib and that means wizards think I'm beneath them."

"Then they're plain stupid and I'm glad I punched out that ass," Harry said stubbornly. "I'd do it again if I had to. I'm sorry I broke Dad's rule about fighting in public, but I'm not sorry I knocked the twit's teeth out. He deserved it, hurting you like that."

Holly looked up at him through her lashes. "Thanks. I think. But I'm still sorry I got you in trouble."

Harry shrugged. "Shoot, you think this the first time I've ever gotten grounded? Or made to write an essay, or lines? Dad can be awful strict sometimes. But he's also fair. And like I said before, I'd pummel the big idiot again for saying such nasty things about you."

Holly flushed, for she had never had anyone defend her that way since her mother had died. And Harry wasn't even a relative. "Why?"

"Because that's how it should be. Would be, if you were really my sister." He smiled at her. "And you didn't do so bad yourself, Miss Sinclair. That kid was bleeding like a fountain after you belted him."

"Well, I picked up a little self-defense when I lived on my own," she admitted softly, her hair sliding forward to cover her face. He thinks of me as a sister. How I wish that were so. A warm glow burned in her, driving out the chill of her father's rejection somewhat. "I hate bullies."

"So do I." Harry agreed. "Okay, we'd better get working on these essays. Soonest begun is soonest done, as Dad says."

Holly nodded, then bent to her paper, determined not to bring any more trouble on the Potions Master or his son, otherwise Severus might reconsider his decision and show her the door. After all, she was a mere foundling, and he owed her nothing. She wrote hastily, hoping to convince Severus of her remorse and promising to do better.

Harry paused, then remarked, "And at least there's one good thing about this whole situation. We both got Dad's birthday present."

"Right. Uh, when is his birthday, Harry?"

"January 9th. Wednesday," answered Harry, then he went back to writing.

* * * * *

Once the children had been sent to bed, Severus took the two essays into his study to read. Harry's was his son's typical, I'm sorry I disappointed you, Dad, I'll try and control myself next time. I should have counted to ten, or walked away, or gotten an adult, but instead I just saw that creep grabbing Holly and I lost it. I know I ought to know better, but you know how I hate bullies, sir. Holly didn't deserve to be targeted like that, I HAD to defend her, Dad, even though I know fighting like that is wrong. But I really am sorry. Next time I'll try and think before I act. Promise.

Severus had to smile a little at his son's declaration. Clearly, Harry though a pureblood, had inherited none of their intolerance, and Severus was proud of Harry's determination and willingness to defend those who couldn't fight back. He had a good heart, like his mother, even if he did need to work on controlling his temper. That was something Severus struggled with to this day, and he resolved to spend more time with Harry, teaching him meditation techniques to keep his temper under wraps.

He moved on to Holly's, expecting something similar. But what he found was more than a simple "I'm sorry".

Severus,

I really am sorry to cause you and Harry so much trouble. It's not fair, you helped me and all I do is make more problems for you. First with the newspaper and then my father and now this. I know this is the last thing you need or want and I'll understand if you decide to tell me to leave. But I really am sorry and I promise I'll do better so you won't have to worry about me embarrassing you or anything like that. I really do love it here, it almost reminds me of my home. Please give me another chance, please.

I know you don't have to, nobody else would have done what you did, but please please don't kick me out. I never got into trouble before my mother died, I swear on her grave, and if you let me stay I'll behave and not get into anymore trouble. I know I'm nothing but a worthless Squib, even though you're too kind to say so, I should have just left the shop instead of trying to argue, no one ever believes people like me anyway. You're the first, sir, and look how I repaid you. Now they'll be talking even more about you and your privacy is ruined and it's all my fault.

I'm so sorry, Severus!

A large splotch marred the next line, as if she had been crying as she was writing.

The rest of the letter was five ways that the fight could have been avoided, as he had requested, but it was the sheer desperation in her

words that struck him to the core. Plainly she was terrified that he would become so disgusted with her that he would send her back out into the cold and dark. Like her father had done.

Severus shook his head. Ah, Merlin help me. She is so damaged by Lucius that I wonder if she will ever learn how to trust men again. I must speak with her tomorrow, make her see that no matter what she does, I will never abandon her or throw her out of my house. Yet he feared that mere words were not enough.

The girl needed time, time to heal, and time to trust.

It was a good thing he had requested an extra week before returning to Hogwarts, for he would have time to establish a tentative relationship as a guardian with the child and set up sessions with Healer Susan Keegan, who could hopefully instill in her a sense of her own worth, and heal some of the terrible harm Malfoy had inflicted.

And when he returned to Hogwarts, he would take both of them with him this time, for only by keeping them close by could he ensure they were safe from Lucius. It was nearly time for Harry to begin his magical education anyway, and he had as good a background in Muggle schooling as any primary school teacher, he could tutor Holly himself, and thereby spare her the torment of bullies, Muggle and wizard.

But for now, he would sleep, and let tomorrow bring what it would. He carefully set aside the essays, Noxed the lamp, and retreated to his room. As he lay in bed, he wondered idly what Albus and Minerva would think of his actions. Not that he owed them any kind of explanation, but he did hope they would support him a little. But if not, he would manage, as he always had. He had always been known as an eccentric, brilliant, reclusive wizard, one who followed his own path, regardless of popular opinion. This was no different.

Yawning, he turned over and buried his face in the pillow. Within moments he was fast asleep, as were the rest of the members of the Snape household, save for Silver, who remained on guard till dawn broke, as always.

Well, how did you like the way Harry defended Holly?

Next: Severus arranges for counseling for Holly and meditation sessions for Harry.

Wanted

Chapter dedicated to my late best friend Susan Keegan, who was much like her namesake in this story.

The next morning, after breakfast, Persephone delivered a letter to Severus from the Mind Healer and Counselor Susan Keegan. In it, Susan had written that she would happily take on a new patient, and thanked Severus for referring the girl to her.

. . .It sounds as though she has an inferiority complex second to none, which isn't surprising considering the warm welcome Squibs have received by wizards here in Britain. You know it's a bit different back in the States, Sev, and I'll need to schedule sessions with her at least two days a week. Sounds as if her father really played havoc with her self-esteem as well, from what you've told me.

I'll do my best, though it may take some time for her to open up to me, even though I'm an empath. Still, you mentioned she's a seer? Seers have always gotten on well with empaths, mostly because we're kind of shunned too by polite society. Too many people think all empaths do is eavesdrop on people's emotions and pry into their heads. Humph! As if I'd ever want to do that to half the selfish aristocratic blue-bloods! They can keep their dirty sordid little secrets, I don't want to know 'em. Of course, anything spoken about in my sessions with little Holly will remain confidential, as part of the Mind Healer Privacy Act. However, you can help her increase her self-esteem by being there for her and giving her reassurance that you will remain there for her.

Kids that have been abandoned like she was tend to fear their authority figures repeating the same mistake and are often frightened and insecure regarding the future and their place in a family. But I know you, Sev, and all you need to do is relax that reserve you maintain and let her see your true feelings and she will be content. We'll work on it together and hopefully we can help her regain her sense of self. Tell Harry I said hi, he must be taller than I am now.

Angels watch over you, my friend.

Susan Keegan, EHC (Empathic Healer Counselor)

Severus had to smile at Susan's refreshing honesty. Good old Susan! I think she and Holly will get on very well, especially because Susan is the last witch to ever display prejudice towards a Squib, since she's a Muggleborn and married to a Muggle besides. Plus, she was also an American, and they were not known for their tolerance of aristocratic pretensions, they had fought their own version of the Muggle American Revolution to free themselves of the dictates of the Wizengamut way back in the 1760's, maintaining that certain decrees, such as not being allowed to marry Muggles, were ridiculous, as was the one that wizards should not be taught wandless magic until they were school age, and that shamans were considered inferior to European wizards. There had been a thriving shamanistic practice in the Americas long before the European wizards had settled there, and the colonial wizards saw no reason why it should not continue. The Wizengamut called them upstarts and refused to listen and in the end, the American warlocks and mages, as they preferred to be called, broke with their British counterparts.

Silver crunched on a large beef bone, lying in the corner beside the hearth, and Severus glanced at the big carnivore fondly. You'd fit right in over there, old friend. There they have Animagi around every corner, their Animagi count is triple what ours is, since most shamans generally claim an Animagus form when they receive their totem spirit animal. You'd have plenty of other wolves to run with too.

He often wondered if Remus missed the company of another wolf, even an ordinary one. It had to be lonely, being the only true wolf left in Britain. But Remus seemed content with his lot, as it was so much better than what he had endured as werewolf.

Severus carefully set Susan's letter down and decided that now was as good a time as any to have that little talk with Holly. The Healer was correct, the child did need constant reassurance, and he knew he would have to tread carefully and be gentler than was his wont. He could get away with being reserved and strict with his students for the most part and his son sometimes, for Harry knew his bark was worse than his bite, but Holly would crumble if he ever gave her a taste of

his snarky sarcastic tongue. Not that he would consider doing so. He was not quite the insensitive bastard he appeared.

The Potions Master rose and walked into the kitchen, where Holly and Harry were washing and drying the breakfast dishes, and said softly, "Holly, I'd like a word with you when you're finished here. Please come to my study."

She jerked up like a startled deer, her sapphire eyes fearful. "Did I do something wrong, sir?"

"No, but I have something I'd like to discuss with you in private."

"Oh. Okay, sir." Then she turned back to industriously drying the plates.

Severus retreated to his study, giving the kids time to finish their chore, though he couldn't help but overhear Holly say nervously to Harry, "Is he mad at me, Harry?"

"Huh? No. Believe me, you'd know if he was. He'd use your last name then, and get all cold and stern. But you didn't do anything to make him mad, so what are you worrying for?"

"I . . . thought maybe he didn't like the way I wrote my essay or something. I never had to write one as a punishment before."

Harry chuckled. "If you're going to stay here, best get used to that. Dad loves assigning punishment essays, he claims they make you really think about what you did wrong and how to avoid making the same mistake next time."

"Is he right?"

"Well . . . yeah. Except I tend to forget sometimes," admitted Harry. "Then he lectures me and grounds me on top of it. Quit worrying. He'd never beat you or anything. My guess is he wants to talk to you about staying on here or something like that. Trust me, he won't bite you."

She gave him a small smile. "If you say so." She sincerely hoped he was right and Severus wanted to discuss her staying with them and not the opposite.

She entered his study quietly, trepidation written all over her face. Severus looked up from his stack of papers and said, "Please, have a seat," he gestured to a sturdy upholstered chair in front of his mahogany roll top.

Holly sat, fighting to keep from biting her nails, a nervous habit she had never managed to rid herself of, much to her father's disgust.

"Now then, first I would like to talk with you about your essay, child."

"My essay? Was it . . .horrible?" she asked, her heart plummeting to her shoes. "I could do it over."

"No, that's not necessary. What I wanted to talk to you about is your belief that I would send you away if you misbehaved." Severus said, and then he leaned forward and looked her right in the eye. "Holly, I know that sort of behavior is what you have come to expect from wizards . . .male wizards in general, because of Lucius. But I am not Lucius. And I promise you that you could never do anything so bad that would make me abandon you or send you away. I meant what I told that shopkeeper yesterday. You are my responsibility now, child. I saved your life and that creates a kind of debt between us, a bond, if you will. And you need never fear that I will ever cast you out into the cold and dark like the man who sired you."

"Not even if I annoy you past bearing? Or people talk about you behind your back for allowing me to stay in your home?"

"Not even then. I've never been one to let gossip get the better of me, and I don't let fools dictate to me what I can and can't do with my life. I wish that I could officially adopt you, but that will have to wait."

"Because of my father."

"Yes. Once I have dealt with him-and rest assured he will be dealt with-then I can file papers to officially make you my daughter, if you want. Would you like that, Holly?"

She considered for a long moment. It was like a wonderful dream, to belong somewhere again, and to have a real family. "Yes, sir." Severus raised an eyebrow. "I mean . . .Severus. It would be . . .I can't believe you'd want me . . .I don't deserve this . . ."

"Now that's where you're wrong, Holly. You certainly do deserve to be happy and have a family like every other child your age. And there is no reason why I wouldn't want you, little one."

"My dad didn't."

"He is an ass and I am nothing like him. You will always be welcome here, Holly Sinclair. Never doubt that." Severus reassured.

"Thank you, sir!" she cried, sniffing.

Severus conjured a handkerchief and murmured, "Dry your eyes, little one. And what is my name?"

"Severus."

"Good." He gave her a smile. "On to the next thing I wished to talk about. I have been speaking to a very good friend of mine, her name is Susan Keegan, and she is similar to a Muggle psychiatrist, except much more intuitive and compassionate. I think it would be good for you to have a few sessions with her. She could help you overcome your fear of being abandoned and your belief that you are nothing save a worthless Squib who doesn't deserve to be happy. I know that Lucius did that to you by his refusal to acknowledge you as his daughter, it was cruel and selfish, and he ought to be strung up and flayed for doing it." His hands clenched on his desk and he forced himself to relax. "Be that as it may, I have asked her if she would be willing to counsel you and she agreed. Now I wish to know if you agree."

Holly hesitated. She didn't know if she was ready to reveal her innermost thoughts to a stranger. But then she recalled her wish that someone understand her. Perhaps Severus was right, and this Healer could provide her with her lost self-confidence again and the understanding she craved.

"Would the sessions be private?"

"Yes. Healer Keegan maintains strict confidentiality, she would never discuss what you tell her with anyone, not even me. Empaths are fanatical about personal privacy. If it will help, I underwent counseling with her myself, after my days as a spy were done with. She is very good at helping you with repressed emotions and healing old wounds. I trust her the way I do almost no one else."

Holly nodded. He knew she was broken inside, and it would be a miracle if she could ever be whole again. But she wanted to be whole, and this was the best opportunity. "I'll see her, then. It can't hurt, right?"

"No, only help." Severus said. "Now that's settled, I can arrange a time and a schedule for her to come this week. After this week, I'll be returning to Hogwarts for the start of the spring term, and both you and Harry will be coming with me."

"We will? I always wanted to see Hogwarts!" Holly said longingly.

"And so you shall." Severus chuckled. "And now, I think you owe me a few hours of work in my lab, miss." He rose to his feet. "Come with me, and I'll show you what you'll be peeling and scrubbing."

Holly followed him obediently, without protest. On the way she passed Harry, who was heading to his room to study for a math quiz. He gave her a thumbs up sign and grinned at her. See? Told you you'd be all right, he seemed to say without words, and the unwanted Malfoy daughter smiled back at him, and in her eyes was a sparkle that had been absent for far too long.

Severus glanced down at her and said, "I wasn't aware my punishments were cause for smiling, young lady."

"Umm . . .no, I'm not smiling because of that. I'm just . . .happy . . .for some reason."

Severus merely arched an eyebrow and said nothing, though in truth he was glad that Holly could find something to smile about.

Then they entered his lab, and Severus showed her how to scrub several piles of mallow roots and then took her to the sink, which was filled with dirty beakers, jars, and vials.

He summoned an apron for her to wear, then said briskly, "Get a move on, child. Soonest begun is soonest done."

Holly hid a grin at the saying, then rolled up her sleeves and got started.

* * * * *

Once he was satisfied that the girl was doing as she ought, the Potions Master left her alone and went to speak to Harry, who was studying for his math quiz, about having meditation sessions. "I think it would benefit you greatly to learn how to calm and focus your mind and help you learn to control your impulsiveness and your temper, Harry. These techniques helped me as well, for self-discipline is the key to managing a powerful magical gift."

Harry listened intently, then nodded. "I understand, Dad. When can we start them?"

"After your quiz, I can go over the basics with you, specifically how to breathe and relax yourself." Severus said. "A good hour should be sufficient to introduce you to the way meditation works and then I think my friend Healer Susan, you remember her from last year, right, will be arriving to speak with Holly."

"She's gonna counsel Holly?"

"Yes. Holly has been abused emotionally by her father and I think it best if she receives professional help." Severus told him.

"And Healer Keegan's a wonderful Mind Healer, she helped you with your nightmares," Harry recalled, for last year Severus had suffered terrible flashbacks and nightmares from his time as a spy, witnessing the atrocities committed by Voldemort's inner circle. They had grown so bad that he could not sleep without resorting to a Dreamless Sleep potion night after night, and since such potions were addictive if taken too frequently, he had decided to seek out a Mind Healer. Thirty-two-year-old Susan Keegan had been recommended as the best in her field and so he had arranged sessions with her and not only found a great therapist, but also a friend.

Harry had been aware of the nightmares, it was impossible to hide them when he could hear Severus screaming loud enough to wake the dead on more than one occasion, and simply telling Harry he was fine had not satisfied his son, who insisted on knowing what was really the matter. Reluctantly, Severus had told him, and to his relief, Harry did not seem to think any less of him because of it. In fact, Harry had told him that he thought Severus was really brave to have lived through all of that without going bonkers. Harry's appreciation had touched the other wizard deeply, for so long he had felt that no one appreciated the risks he took or the things he endured as Dumbledore's premiere secret agent.

Out of the few he called friends, only Remus and Susan understood the depth of pain and suffering he had experienced, watching innocents being tortured and being helpless to prevent it for fear of blowing his cover. It was one reason why he was happy to take in Malfoy's cast off child-for here was one innocent he could save, one life he could preserve from hatred and intolerance and death.

"She did indeed," Severus agreed. "And I think she can help Holly as well." Then he cleared his throat. "However, it is now time for you and I to do some controlled breathing."

Harry looked puzzled. "What's that?"

"It is when you breathe in and out, slowly, and count breaths. Like this." Severus explained. "Breathe in through your nose, fill your lungs with air, and then exhale, slowly, through your mouth. That's

one breath. Now, let's do it together. Breathe in, and don't think about anything in particular, just listen to your breath moving through your lungs. Now exhale. Slowly . . . Very good! That's two. Now breathe in again . . ."

He had Harry go through the breathing exercises five times, breathing up to ten breaths, until the boy was totally relaxed and calm, almost sleepy. Then he told him to close his eyes and imagine a peaceful place. "Fix it in your mind, son, a place where you are safe and happy, and content."

Harry obeyed, finding that the winter cottage in Yorkshire near Wolf Wood kept popping up, and while he was there, so too was Silver, his father, and oddly enough, Holly as well. Being here with my family is the best place to be, he thought and smiled.

"Have you found a special place, Harry?" Severus asked after fifteen minutes.

"Yes."

"Good. Remember it, and when we resume lessons tomorrow, you can go to it and relax. That special place is called your center, and you should be able to find it and go to it in your mind whenever you wish, even if you are upset. One day I shall teach you to find it when you are under stress or in pain, but for now I simply want you to find it each time you begin breathing exercises. How do you feel?"

"Uh . . . good. I feel really relaxed and sleepy. Is it supposed to be like that?"

"Yes. Once you've learned how to breathe right, I can teach you how to take negative emotions, like fear or anger, and put them into a box in your mind, so you don't get overwhelmed with them and allow them to cloud your judgment."

"Oh. Okay, that sounds good." Then he asked, "Will you teach meditation to Holly too?"

"Not right away. She has much in her past to overcome before she can learn proper techniques, and Susan wishes to work with her first." Severus said. "These sessions will be between you and I for quite some time, son."

And Harry was content, for though he enjoyed having Holly around, he also liked spending time alone with just Severus sometimes.

Soon after they had halted their session, there came a knock on the door. Silver looked up from his place upon the hearth and whuffed, but it was not a warning bark, but merely a friendly acknowledgement that someone was visiting. Severus rose. "That will be Susan."

He opened the door to admit a medium-sized woman with dark chestnut hair and lively brown eyes. "Hello, Sev. It's been awhile, but you're looking good, professor."

"You too, Sue." He smiled at her, and she grinned back and embraced him.

She was dressed in a rather conservative navy knit skirt and matching top, her cloak was soft powder blue with a hood lined with swansdown. Her shoes were softest leather that made no sound when she entered the house. "Well, the house hasn't changed much that I can see," she remarked looking around.

They entered the den and Harry rose and greeted the Healer. "Hi, Healer Sue."

"Harry! Goodness, you're almost as tall as me now!" she laughed. "What's your dad been feeding you-Growth Serum?"

Harry laughed. "Nope, he's just been force-feeding me green vegetables." He made a face. "Like lima beans and spinach."

"Poor kid. Well, you can have some of these, they'll cheer you up." From one of her cloak pockets she produced a plate of homemade chocolate chip and nut cookies.

Harry's eyes lit up, for the Healer was also a superb baker. "Oh, awesome! Thanks, Healer Sue." He took the plate reverently.

"You spoil him, Susan." Severus said, pretending to sound annoyed.

The Healer smirked. "Well, someone has to, oh strict father."

"Yeah, Dad."

"Hush, Little Mischief. Take your treat and go have a snack. But mind you save some for me and Holly."

"All right." He spun about and practically Apparated into the kitchen. Susan's chocolate chips were a real treat and he would savor each bite.

"Typical boy," Susan said fondly. Then she knelt to say hello to Silver, who gave her a wolfish grin and nuzzled her hand. "Well, wolf Prince, how are you doing?"

Silver gave a soft whine, indicating he was well. Susan knew most of the story about Remus and was under wizard oath to keep Remus's true identity a secret.

"Good. I may need your services during some of my sessions with Holly." The Mind Healer said. "Would that be all right with you?"

Silver nodded and then returned to his bone.

"Speaking of which, where is my newest patient, Sev?"

"In my lab, scrubbing some beakers."

Susan cocked an eyebrow at him. "Punishment chores already, Sev?"

"She got into a brawl with some other wizarding children at Diagon Alley yesterday." Severus began, sounding a bit defensive. "I had to punish her and Harry too. The both of them are grounded for a week."

"I'm not criticizing you, Sev. I'm not a parent. Not yet, anyway." She smiled softly.

Severus blinked. "Are you expecting, Sue?"

"I think yes. I've been feeling sort of sleepy and radiant at the same time, and that's how empaths get at the beginning of pregnancy. I think I'm probably three and a half months, or around that, my cycles are unreliable so it's hard to tell but I have an appointment with Healer Avery in two days and then he can confirm it."

"Congratulations. Does Billy know?"

The empath nodded happily. "Yes, and he's thrilled. We have waited so long." She shot Severus a mischievous look. "Now we can compare toddler and infant horror stories and stuff, Sev."

"Oh joy. I was hoping to forget some of those."

"Sure you were," she winked at him knowingly. "Well, let's meet your newest family member, Sev."

Severus opened the door to his lab and found Holly drying her hands, she had finished all the work he had assigned her. "Holly, come here. There's someone I would like you to meet."

Holly came and shook hands with Susan, smiling at her a little nervously. "How do you do, ma'am?"

"Very well, and just call me Susan, or Healer Sue if you insist, like my old friend here did at first, on being formal. Sev, may we borrow your study?"

"Yes, of course." He gestured down the hall, and Susan walked over to the door and opened it.

Holly followed, and sat down in the same chair she had occupied before.

Susan sat next to her, not behind the desk as expected. Her brown eyes were warm and friendly, and Holly found herself liking the woman's expression and attitude. Clearly she was not a witch who held to the old prejudices concerning Squibs. Well, of course not, Severus would have never hired her else. But I wonder, can she really help me? Ever since Dad threw me out, I feel all empty and cold inside, like a frozen icicle. Only when Harry is near me or Severus holds me do I feel a little warm. "Can you really read minds?" she blurted out, before she could think better of it.

"No. I'm an empath, which means I can read emotional states and sometimes project emotions as well," Susan said candidly. "It helps me understand what you're feeling so much better, Holly. But . . . I'm not going to be reading you at all for these first few sessions. That's only when I've gotten to know you better. I think we should have sessions twice a week for now and perhaps three times a little later, if all goes well. First, let me tell you a little about me. I'm a Mind Healer, as you know, and I'm an American, originally from New Jersey. My husband Bill is a Muggle and I myself am a Muggleborn witch, not a big deal in the States, but I've raised a few eyebrows here . . ."

Holly listened to Susan tell her about what she did and how she had healed many other wizards from various emotional and physical abuse, including Severus. Gradually, she began to relax, the little Healer's voice was very soothing. And her being a Muggleborn was a plus, because she could relate to Holly, having experienced prejudice of her own, no doubt.

Healer Keegan talked for ten minutes, allowing her patient to relax before she said, "Now, would you like to tell me about yourself, Holly? We'll start with something easy. How old are you and when is your birthday?"

"I'm nine and my birthday's December 25th. I was a Christmas present, my mum used to say, and that's why she named me Holly."

"And I'll bet that was the best Christmas present ever," said Susan. "How about your dad?"

"He thought so too, until . . .he found out I had no magic," Holly said lowering her eyes.

"Ah. He's a pureblood, I take it?"

"Yes. He comes from an old family, the Malfoys. And he thinks . . .he thinks I'm worthless."

Susan remained calm, not reacting to the statement. "But not your mother," she said, feeling the shame and guilt emanating from the child even through her shields.

"No. Mum always loved me, no matter what." Holly admitted, tearing up a little.

"Tell me about your mother. What was her name? Was she pretty? Was she a witch too?"

Little by little, Holly revealed her past, allowing the therapist to get a clear picture of her life before she had become the "snow girl" the papers labeled her. Once she had been loved and cherished, once she had been the daughter of a prominent official, a secret daughter, but one that he had acknowledged as his own. Until he discovered his perfect princess was a flawed mortal, something which was not permitted in Lucius Malfoy's world. An unforgivable sin, in his eyes.

By the time Holly had finished telling Susan about her former family and home, it was past three and the little girl was tired and hungry and badly wanted a shoulder to cry on, for speaking about Valina made her grief resurface.

Sensing this, Susan called Silver into the room. "You know, Holly, sometimes it helps to hug someone during these times. Sometimes the best medicine is a good listener, and Silver is the best listener of all. You can tell him anything-anything at all, and he will listen and never betray your secrets."

"I can?"

"Oh, yes. And he makes a wonderful pillow." She gestured and Silver came to lay his great head on Holly's knee.

At first, Holly just gaped at the big wolf, for he had never done anything like that before. Then she placed a hand on his head, and stroked him. He felt so soft and so warm that she couldn't resist hugging him.

Silver crooned low in his throat and licked her face.

All at once she felt a dam burst within her and she was crying, hot tears running down her face and into Silver's thick fur.

"There now, sweetling. That's good, let yourself grieve," the Healer murmured, putting a hand gently on the girl's back and rubbing very gently.

Silver remained steady as a rock, allowing the girl to hold him and gain a measure of comfort, for it was clear that she badly needed it.

Severus was in the den, reading a potions magazine, when he heard the soft sound of a child weeping. He sat up, then reminded himself that Susan knew what she was doing, and relaxed. Harry, who had been reading as well, a Muggle story called *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis, glanced up from his book and said, "Dad, why is Holly crying?"

"Probably because she is reliving something unhappy or discussing something that upsets her."

"But Dad, I thought Healer Sue was supposed to make her feel better."

"She will, but sometimes, son, you need to remember what upsets you before you can move on and learn to be happy again. Don't worry, Harry. Susan would never hurt Holly, she knows what she's doing. Sometimes tears must come first before you can heal an old wound."

Something about the way the Potions Master said that made Harry think that he too had experienced what Holly had, and he nodded. "Okay, Dad. You'd know, wouldn't you?"

"Yes. Holly has a long road ahead of her, but with our help, she will recover." Then he resumed perusing his periodical, content to leave the child in the most capable hands he knew, the Mind Healer who had saved him from blackest despair.

Harry sighed and turned back to reading about Aslan, Lucy, and their battle with the White Witch, though he kept an ear tuned, but Holly soon stopped weeping and he allowed himself to return to Narnia, trusting that all would work out in the end.

Glisten

In the two days that followed, Holly became more comfortable with Healer Keegan, who encouraged her to speak about her feelings regarding her father, and also Severus and Harry as well. For the first time in her life, Holly found herself feeling furious over her father's betrayal instead of devastated. The hurt at Lucius' abandonment had morphed into a fiery anger at the man who had not wanted or cared that his only daughter had nearly died due to his callous neglect.

"Write down how you feel in this journal, if you'd like," Susan told her, handing her a soft powder blue journal with a sapphire ribbon marker. "Any time you feel upset or happy or very strongly about something or someone, you should try and write it down. That will help you organize your feelings and not let them overwhelm you. I keep a journal near my bed and write down my thoughts for the day every night before I sleep. And I also write in it first thing in the morning."

"Do you write things you dream, Healer Sue?"

"Sometimes. I find that writing things down helps me to clear my mind and focus. Try it for two weeks and let me know how it works."

"Okay. Uh . . .will you ever want to read it?" she asked uncertainly. The journal sounded a lot like a diary.

"Only if you wish me to look at an entry. Otherwise, the journal is your own private one, and I will not pry into it, child." Susan reassured her, giving her a smile.

She played a game with Holly called "Tell Me How You Feel" and made believe that she were a person Holly wished to tell her feelings to, and encouraged the child to speak her mind without fear of censure or ridicule. The first time, Susan pretended to be Lucius, and ordered Holly to tell her "father" what she thought of him.

"Don't be afraid, hon. Tell me exactly what you think of my abandoning you in the snow and not coming to your mother's funeral. Go on, Holly, give it to me straight!"

She projected encouragement at the little girl, and suddenly Holly found herself glaring at the Healer and yelling, "You're an awful horrible person for throwing me out in the snow!"

"I am? Why?"

"Because I'm your little girl, that's why!"

"So?"

"So . . .you stupid idiot, you're supposed to LOVE me, not hurt me! But you only pretended, Dad! You never loved me or Mum either, did you?"

"Me? Love a Squib? Don't be ridiculous."

Holly clenched her fists. "You're mean and nasty, Dad! No real dad would do what you did to me and . . .and . . I HATE you! You ruined my life, you ruined Mum's life too and . . .and . . I wish you DIED!" she shrieked, tears of anger streaming down her face.

"Why, you ungrateful brat! How dare you?"

"You're an ungrateful father . . .I loved you and you never cared! YOU should've died, not Mum! I wish you were never my father!"

"And who, pray tell, would you have in my place?"

"Severus!" Holly cried triumphantly. "I'd have him over you quick as a wink, he cares for me. He wants me. And I want him! So there!"

Susan allowed Holly to rant and rave at "Lucius" for another ten minutes, letting the child get all the negative feelings she had harbored towards her father out in the open.

When it seemed that Holly had wound down, Susan clapped her hands and said, "Bravo! That's telling him a thing or two. How do you feel now, honey?"

It was a moment before Holly was able to reply, she felt strangely tired after that outpouring of emotion.

Just then, Severus stuck his head in the door and glanced up and down the study. "Is everything all right in here? You're both still breathing?"

Susan grinned up at him, her eyes twinkling. "Yes, but I think we've just killed Lucius."

"Good. Keep going," Severus said, a satisfied smirk stealing over his face. Then he nodded and departed.

After that, Susan thought perhaps a Silencing Charm cast over the room might be a good idea, so the rest of the household would not become alarmed. All in all, she thought the sessions were progressing nicely.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, Severus continued to instruct Harry in the finer points of meditation, finding his son a most receptive student. Harry learned how to breathe correctly after their second session and Severus was showing him how to use his breathing to see his magical core and recognize auras surrounding another wizard.

"Every wizard has his or her own unique aura," Severus told him. "You can learn how to recognize another wizard by the aura he gives off and sometimes even tell what wizard cast a particular spell by the aura imprint he leaves upon his working."

"Really? Then you could tell who cast a spell just by reading the aura?"

"Yes, provided I am familiar with the wizard's aura signature and he or she is not using a spell to mask their aura. But, we'll get into that subject later. For now, I want you to memorize your own aura and mine."

Harry concentrated, going into his special place and then breathing deeply. One. Two. Three. Four. Then he peered into his magical core and allowed himself to look at his own aura. It was a mixture of deep blue, green, and golden streaks. The blue was wider than the green or the gold, but each color complimented and harmonized with the other.

He concentrated harder and then tried to 'see' Severus's aura.

That was a bit harder, since he needed to leave his own magical core and peer across an odd misty place until he saw a bright flash. When he started to breathe and count again, the bright flash intensified, until he could see a corona of colors haloing Severus.

Severus's colors were a deep emerald, a paler blue, gold, and violet. The emerald predominated, but the other three colors were nearly even in their distribution. He wondered what the colors meant.

Then he felt a sudden tugging and he could not keep Severus's aura in his sight. He opened his eyes and rubbed them, they felt slightly gritty. "Dad? I saw your aura."

Severus looked pleased. He handed Harry a piece of parchment and several colored pieces of chalk. "Draw it for me, please."

Harry did, and then he drew his own for good measure.

Severus examined the pictures and nodded. "That was very good for a first sighting." He gently corrected a few mistakes on his aura, making the purple strand more wavy and intertwined with the blue one.

"Dad, do the aura colors mean anything?"

"Yes. The colors can indicate what types of magic you have an affinity for. But I'll explain more about that later on. Right now it's more important for you to memorize what your aura and mine look like."

Harry exhaled softly. "Okay. I guess I can do that."

"I know you can, Harry. You're very bright, and memorizing auras should be a snap for you." Severus handed his son the parchment. "But let's have lunch. I am famished and you probably are too."

Harry laughed. "I sure am!" Then he rose from the sofa and headed into the kitchen to rummage through the pantry.

* * * * *

Wednesday arrived cool and clear, and Severus decided to spend the day up at the cottage in Yorkshire near Wolf Wood, figuring it would be more peaceful there and Silver could roam around as he pleased, instead of being cooped up inside all the time, the way he was at Spinner's End. And the children could have fun playing in the snow. Harry had always enjoyed spending holidays up there, frolicking in the snow with Silver and on rare occasions Severus as well.

He Floo-called Susan and told her where they would be, so she could still have her session with Holly that afternoon, then he instructed both children to pack an outfit and some nightclothes. The cottage was actually known officially as Snow Vale Cottage, an appropriate name for such a residence. Severus had it on a permanent rental with the owner, who hardly went up there except to maintain the cottage twice a year, and was happy to find a renter who enjoyed using the house. Both children were very excited to be going there, Harry had told Holly all about his adventures there when he was seven, which was the first time he had encountered Silver, his fall through the ice and subsequent rescue by Silver, how Severus had been afraid Silver had hurt him and quarreled with Harry and the fact that Silver was no ordinary wolf.

"He was once a person like you and me?" Holly repeated, astonished.

"Yup. Once he was a wizard named Remus Lupin, my dad's schoolmate, and he was under a werewolf curse." Harry told her the story of A Wolf in Winter and how the spirit of Silverstrike the wolf Prince had come and transformed Remus into a silver wolf to break the curse, but the transformation was permanent.

"But Remus didn't care, he was happy not to be a monster every full moon. I can show you where I met him once we get to the cottage." Harry said.

"I'd really love to see that!" Holly declared, her face shining. "Is that where Silver goes to hunt?"

"Yeah," Harry nodded, picking out a pair of jeans and a long sleeved shirt and some pajamas.

"What did Father Christmas bring you for Christmas that year?"

"Uh . . .a really cool broom called a Blizzard. I outgrew it last year though and my dad got me a Silverstreak 2000."

"Was that all?"

"Uh, no. He also gave me a bunch of books about Greek and Roman mythology and Egyptian mythology too. And some new clothes and a coat and candy. Oh, and a junior potions kit. What did he bring you this year?"

Holly smiled. "The one thing I wanted most. A place I belonged and . . .people who care about me," she answered, a faraway look in her eyes. She hesitated to use the word family, because with Lucius still having a claim on her, she couldn't really belong to the Snapes yet. But maybe someday . . . "That's the best present of all."

Harry nodded. "You're right. He gave my dad the same gift a long time ago, when I was a baby. He brought me to him, I think, and we became a family too. I was an orphan too once, till Dad adopted me."

"You mean, you're not . . .his real son?"

"No, not by blood. But I'm his real son in here," Harry touched his heart. "And that's what matters. Dad always says a family isn't defined by blood, but by your heart. Meaning that if you love someone enough, then they can be your family same as if you were born to them."

"Oh." Holly said softly, and she grew quiet for a long moment. I wonder if Severus will ever feel that way about me one day? Or Harry? And then I can be their heart-sister and daughter.

Then they heard Severus calling, asking if they were ready yet, and they hurried to get their clothes together and their presents before Apparating away to Yorkshire.

* * * * *

The snow in Yorkshire seemed whiter and brighter than the snow in London, perhaps it was the fresh country air here, Severus mused, inhaling the frosty clean breeze in delight, it tingled as it hit the back of his throat. Funny, but though he had grown up in London all of his life, he felt most at home here, in this remote cottage at the edge of what the locals swore was a haunted wood. Haunted because occasionally they had caught glimpses of a great silver wolf running or heard one howling.

Here the snow seemed to glisten with an unusual radiance, and the wind sprites seemed to prefer this place, Severus and Harry always saw several more here than they did in London during the winter.

Harry released Severus's black-gloved hand and raced off to jump into a large snowdrift alongside the walk, shouting, "Yippee! We're back!"

Holly giggled at Harry's enthusiasm, and glanced about, squinting a bit as the sun struck the snow and made it glitter like a thousand stars. She shaded her eyes with one pink mittened hand and looked at the small stone and wood shingled cottage, which had snow surrounding it like a cocoon. All except the side of the house with the stone chimney, that only had snow coating the lower portion, since the warmth of the blazing fire melted the rest. Smoke drifted into the air, making lacy patterns in the sky.

"Wow! It's so pretty here. Like a fairytale cottage," she murmured. Oddly enough, seeing the snow here didn't make her feel all cold and shivery inside, the way seeing the snow in London did. There was so much more of it here that she knew she should be afraid, but she

wasn't, and she had no idea why. She glanced off to the left and saw a long snowy expanse of lawn sloping down to a large wood.

"That's Wolf Wood, right?"

"Yes, and Silver is somewhere in there, hunting." Severus replied. He went up to the front door and unlocked it. "Come along, Holly. Might as well get settled. Harry! Come inside and put your things away. You can play in the snow later."

"Aww, Dad! I can unpack later. C'mon, let's have a snowball fight."

"Not now, Harry. Right now I want nothing more than a nice hot cup of tea and perhaps a cinnamon scone."

Harry opened his mouth to protest, then closed it when he recalled this was Sev's birthday and he shouldn't disagree with his father today. Then he got a naughty little idea. He quickly formed a small snowball and then half-rose from the drift he'd jumped into, snow coating him like a living snowman, and lobbed the snowball at the back of his father's head.

"Catch, Dad!"

SPLAT!

The snow struck Severus square on the shoulder.

Severus whirled around. "What in Merlin's name?" he brushed the snow off his great coat and frowned. "Harry, did you just throw a snowball at me?"

"Uh . . .my hand slipped," his son replied, looking as guilty as a three-year-old snitching biscuits from a biscuit tin before dinner. He concealed a smile behind his red mitten. He knew Severus would never buy his lame excuse and also never allow his son to get the better of him.

Indeed, the Potions Master scowled at his mischievous offspring, hissing, "You've got some nerve, boy, starting a snowball fight with

me on my birthday, no less." He gave Harry a mock-glare and cried, "You cheeky brat! You forget who's the champion snowball thrower around here."

"What champion?" Harry pretended to glance around.

"Me." Severus challenged, then he scooped up a large handful of snow and sent it flying at Harry.

Harry tried to dodge, but half-buried in a snow drift didn't give him much time to avoid a superfast missile coming right at him, thrown by an expert like Snape.

SMOOSH!

It landed smack in Harry's face, and he was nearly knocked down by the impact.

"Ooof!" he sputtered, and brushed off the snow.

"You were saying, mister?" chuckled Sev wickedly.

"Sneaky, Dad!" laughed Harry when he was able to talk again. Then he made another snowball and threw it at Holly. It struck her sleeve and she jumped. "C'mon, Holl. Play with us. You can be on my team if you want. Us against Dad."

"But two against one's no fair."

"Yes it is. He's the champion, remember?" Harry coaxed. "C'mon! It'll be fun."

Holly hesitated for a moment. She hadn't played in the snow like this since Valina died. Valina had loved winter, and she always made time to play in the snow with her daughter, building snow witches and angels and having snowball fights too. She stared at the powdery stuff, noting how it glistened in the sunshine.

"Okay!" she grinned, and grabbed up a handful of snow and threw it at the Potion Master's side. It caught him on the leg. "Bullseye!" she

cheered, then ran to help Harry out of the snowdrift and to somewhere they could hide and duck Severus's barrage of precisely aimed snowballs.

Within minutes, the air was thick with snow, and the shouts of children's laughter echoed through the still air, sweet and joyful. The sprites whispered and spun around, ecstatic to see another child here, enjoying the lovely winter day, even if she could never see them.

They gleefully tossed snow crystals down upon Severus's head and chuckled, their laughter like the chiming of multiple silver bells.

Harry and Holly raced through the snow, pursued by Severus, who could run quicker than they could because his legs were so much longer and he was not hampered by the deep snow quite as much as they were.

He chased them around the cottage and across the yard, they fled, shrieking in pretend fear.

"Help! Help!"

"Quick, Holly, he's after us!" gasped Harry, grabbing Holly by the arm and practically dragging the smaller girl after him.

"We'll never get away, Harry. He's too fast," the little girl shook her head.

"Wanna make a bet?" laughlll laughed Harry. "We've got a secret weapon."

"We do?" Holly looked around, puzzled. "What?"

Severus had nearly caught up to them, when suddenly a silver shapr flew out of the trees and slammed into the Potion Master's knees, knocking Severus flat on his back in the snow.

"Silver!" shouted Harry.

The big wolf shook himself and grinned wolfishly at the children. There was a slight dusting of snow upon his coat that made it glitter a bit, and his amber eyes sparkled with humor.

"Silver, you blasted cheating overgrown puppy!" sputtered Snape, sitting up and brushing frantically at the snow all over him. It clung to his gloves and the back of his coat and small rivulets were melting and trickling down the back of his neck, he flinched, then growled, "This means war, wolf!" And tackled Silver, knocking the massive animal into the snow.

The two scuffled, rolling over and over, Silver mock-growling and snapping at Sev's feet and hands. Severus mock-cuffed the big animal about the ears and poked him lightly in the ribs, thumping the great wolf's sides playfully.

Then Silver managed to wriggle free and sprang away over the snow.

Severus staggered to his feet, a snowball forming on his glove to fling after the impudent animal, when the two children jumped on him, knocking him face first into the snow again.

"Got you, Dad!"

"Surprise, Severus!"

The Potions Master coughed, gasped, and then grabbed both impudent little scamps and tossed them into the snow beside him.

"Ahh! It's cold!" yelped Harry, who now had snow down his collar.

"No fair, Severus!" Holly protested, but she was smiling, her pale cheeks colored with a rosy tint.

"Very fair, my sneaky little snow sprite! All's fair in love, war, and snowball fights."

Harry stuck his tongue out at him, and Severus pulled his son across his knees and lifted a hand.

Holly whimpered, sure he was going to spank Harry, but all Severus did was bring his hand down across the back of his son's knees, his slender fingers tickling him unmercifully.

Harry giggled uncontrollably, squirming.
"AHH . . . HAHAHA . . . Please, Dad, no more! . . . HEHEHEAHAHA . . . Stop! . . . I'll be good, promise!"

"I'll believe it when I see it, you impudent scamp." Severus smirked, his fingers moving up Harry's neck, making his son explode in mirth.
"A Snape takes no prisoners!"

When he had sufficiently subdued his son, he turned and tickled Holly as well, making her laugh helplessly. She fell half into the snow, the laughter welling up from somewhere deep inside of her, warming her to the depths of her soul, until tears of mirth glistened on her cheeks. For the first time since Valina's death, the icy ball sheathing her heart began to dissolve, as Harry and Severus laughed with her, sitting in the snow, warm despite the cold.

* * * * *

Eventually, Severus declared a halt to their romp and said it was time to go inside, and they all trooped into the cottage, which was blessedly warm, shed boots and coats and gloves in the entryway, and Severus dried off their hair with a Warming Charm. Then he went into the kitchen, fixed them all cups of steaming cocoa, and plates of scones, and they ate relaxing in front of the roaring fire.

The exertion tired them out, and the children fell asleep soon afterwards, leaving the Potions Master a few hours to relax and unwind before Susan arrived, bearing a cake.

"Happy birthday, Sev! And here's your birthday cake, courtesy of Keegan Bakery," she announced.

"Sue, you didn't have to do that," he protested faintly.

"Of course I did!" she waved off his embarrassment. "And you get dinner too," she indicated the grocery bags sitting by her feet,

enlarged and removed from her pockets. "Barbecued beef sandwiches, mashed potatoes, and salad. Just like my mom used to make."

"Thank you."

"For what? What's a little dinner between friends?" she smiled, then looked over to where the two children were sprawled on the sofas, sleeping peacefully. "Tired them out, huh? What did you do, make them get up at the crack of dawn and cook you breakfast?"

Severus snorted in disbelief. "Hardly." He told her of the impromptu snowball fight. "I haven't played like that since . . . Lily and I were their age." He smiled reminiscently.

"Good for you, Sev! See, it's like I always say, you're never too old to have fun."

He blushed faintly. "I'm thirty."

"So? It's just a number, Severus. Not a prison sentence. There's no earthly reason why you can't enjoy yourself every once in awhile, and playing in the snow is such fun!"

"Oh sure," he mock-grumbled. "And so is getting sat on by a hundred-seventy-five pound wolf."

"What?"

"Silver knocked me down," he elaborated.

The little Healer shouted with laughter. "Too bad I wasn't there, Snape. Then I could have sat on you." She winked at him playfully.

"Watch it, Keegan. You're married, remember?"

"I love Billy, Sev, but if I had met you first, Potions Master . . ."

"You'd not have wanted me then. I was damaged goods," he said self-deprecatingly. "Tainted by association."

"No. Never that. You were never one of them, Sev. Trust me, I know. No one knows the stench of evil and corruption like an empath. Your soul is clean, Snape. My talent cannot lie." She gazed at him, and there was nothing in her eyes but sheer honesty.

He coughed uncomfortably. "I'm too old to start a relationship now. I have a son and a . . . daughter."

"Sev, don't be ridiculous! You're never too old to love again. Don't shut yourself up in a box, old friend, and let yourself molder away like a batch of agate moss. Just because Lily is gone is no reason to live your life in mourning."

"I'm not . . ."

She shook a finger at him. "Never lie to an empath, Sev. You're alive and young and you deserve to be happy. She's out there, somewhere, waiting. All you have to do is find her."

He chuckled. "Ever the optimist."

"Always. Take a chance, Sev. You won't regret it."

"Are you a Seer too, like Holly?"

Susan shrugged mysteriously. "All Mind Healers bear a touch of Sight. And mine tells me that somewhere out there is another who can teach you how to have fun and to be happy, like your Lily did once. When you meet her, you'll know."

"Love at first sight?" he scoffed.

"Listen to your heart, Sev. It's wiser than you know," was all she replied. Then she waved a hand and all the bags were levitated into the kitchen.

Severus followed to help her unpack them, and asked how Holly was doing with her therapy.

"Quite well. Though it will take time for her to heal. But she will heal, Sev, she's amazingly resilient . . .Got any tea, sorcerer?"

He smirked and summoned a cup for her and watched as she assembled ingredients for dinner, and he spoke of Harry's lessons in meditation and taking the children to Hogwarts at the end of the week.

* * * * *

After Holly's therapy session, they all ate dinner, which was delicious, and sang 'Happy Birthday' to Severus, and ate cake. Severus opened his gifts from the children, saying they were first rate, and thanking them. The new quill and ink went on his desk and the beakers in his lab and the potions book he would read that night. Then Susan said she had to be going, Billy would be home from his job soon, and she hugged both Children and Severus goodbye before Apparating away.

Severus stood on the back porch, watching the snow gently falling over the wood, the last rays of the afternoon sun making it glisten like diamond dust. From further away, the eerie cry of a hunting wolf swelled in the air, and the Potions Master smiled. Good hunting, Lupin. This was a wonderful birthday after all.

Did you like my snowball fight?

Next: They all go to Hogwarts and Holly causes a sensation for some of the staff.

A Bit of Tension

The days following Severus's birthday passed in a kind of whirlwind for both Harry and Holly. Before they knew it, it was Saturday night, and Severus had made a final inspection of all their bags and their trunk and so on. That night, Holly was so excited she couldn't fall asleep. She kept thinking about all the things Harry had ever told her about Hogwarts, like the potions classroom was in the dungeon, under the Black Lake, which had a giant squid in it. She wondered if the squid were dangerous?

Harry had also told her that the staircases moved and there was a giant gamekeeper named Hagrid who had all kinds of interesting wild animals that he raised and he occasionally wandered the forest out back and he had taken Harry with him once or twice, to see baby unicorns and griffin chicks. Holly sighed and wished morning would hurry up and get here, she would love to see a baby unicorn or a griffin or even a puppy. Valina had not been allowed to have any animals in her flat, but Holly loved them, and couldn't wait to see magical ones.

She yawned, then found her eyes shutting in spite of herself. In moments, she was asleep, dreaming of unicorns.

Severus came into the den to check upon her soon after, and was pleased to note that the child had fallen asleep with a smile on her face. He gently tucked the blankets about her and whispered, "Pleasant dreams, little one," before departing.

He headed into Harry's room next, and found his son sprawled half off the bed, his covers tangled about his wiry frame. The Potions Master shook his head and slipped an arm underneath Harry and moved him back to the center of the bed, and straightened the covers. "Who are you fighting in your sleep, Harry mine? More bullies?" Severus whispered, smoothing his son's hair from his forehead and kissing his brow lightly. "Sleep well, my brave one."

Only after performing this nightly ritual did Severus return to his own room to sleep until dawn touched the tops of the lamp posts.

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Holly was awed at her first glimpse of Hogwarts. She had thought Malfoy Manor was big, but it could fit in one corner of the castle. Knowing full well that it was easy to get lost in the castle the first time one entered it, Severus insisted the children carry maps that would point out the way back to his quarters, which were located next to the Slytherin dormitory and also his classroom. "Keep the map upon you at all times," he had reminded them at least twenty times when they first arrived. Harry had rolled his eyes, plainly he was familiar with this injunction, but Holly quickly promised she would obey her guardian, eager as she was to explore the castle with Harry.

Severus had insisted they unpack before wandering about anywhere, and he told the children he had a brief staff meeting with the other House Heads and the Headmaster, he would return in an hour to have lunch in their quarters. "Afterwards, you may go and see Hagrid, I believe he said he has a new crop of unicorn foals to show you, Harry. And you can introduce him to Silver."

"Dad, are we still pretending Silver's only part wolf?" Harry asked.

Severus nodded. "We must. It would not be safe for him if anyone suspected otherwise. He is too intelligent for a mere animal, and people must never suspect he is anything like a werewolf. And true wolves are extinct here, you both know that, so you must pretend he is nothing more than a very intelligent wolf-dog."

Harry bit his lip, he hated lying about the true nature of Silver. "But Dad, it's so degrading. For Silver, I mean."

Severus sighed. "Harry, Silver understands. It is unfortunate, but Remus does not want the truth to be known. He would be an object of curiosity and viewed with distrust and he especially does not want the Headmaster knowing what he is."

"Why?" Holly asked then. "Will the Headmaster think he's evil or something?"

"No, but he often meddles in things best left alone. Silver fears he may try and undo Silverstrike's magic, and make things worse. The Headmaster believes he knows best for everyone, and he will not like that Remus chose to remain a wolf over being a man. He has never fully understood the agony the werewolf curse was for Remus, not just physically, but emotionally." Severus cleared his throat and gave both the children a warning look. "So, for the sake of Silver's sanity, you will both remain quiet on this subject. And in public, Silver will act like an ordinary animal."

Both children agreed, then they went to finish unpacking.

Though Severus's quarters were not huge, he did manage to get the house elves to add on a small room for his ward, and so Holly had her own room in the castle. He told her she could decorate it however she wished, she simply had to tell the elves what she wanted and they would provide it for her. The little girl was delighted and gave him a hug before departing to ask the elves to make the walls of her bedroom a pretty cream color with small rosebuds climbing it, like she had back at her flat with Valina.

Severus turned to Harry and said, "Remind me to do that at our house as well."

"Is she gonna stay with us forever then?"

"If I can get Lucius to relinquish paternity rights, then yes." Severus said.

"Did he already do that when he dumped her into the snow?"

"Yes and no. I know he does not claim her as his child, but his name is on her birth certificate, even though she doesn't bear his last name. In order for me to adopt her, he has to sign a waver that he denies any rights as her blood father."

"Will he?"

"If he's smart, he will," Severus growled. Though knowing Lucius, he might deny Severus because he knew that was what Severus and

Holly both wanted. And Dumbledore probably would caution Severus to wait as well. Severus intended to do as he damn well pleased. "I have to be going to my meeting. Stay here and tell Holly about living here, and don't get into trouble. I should be back in an hour."

"Okay, Dad," said Harry, and then Severus left, his long black cloak rustling about him as he slipped out the door and down the hallway.

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The staff meeting dragged on interminably from Severus's viewpoint, and he had to fight to keep from yawning or drumming his fingers upon the table. But at last Albus wound down his "Welcome Back" pep talk and handed out the class rosters for the term and the schedules for the Houses. Then the Headmaster announced that they would have two new additional little guests this term.

"Of course, you all know Harry, Severus's son from past years he has spent here, but he has recently become the guardian of a little girl, Holly Sinclair, as well."

"Is that the girl you rescued from freezing to death in Diagon Alley?" queried Professor Flitwick.

"The Squib child?" asked Trelawney dreamily. "I foresee great danger in her future."

Severus ignored her, Trelawney never predicted true as far as he was concerned, and she was overfond of prophecies of doom and gloom. "Yes, she is that same child, Filius. Her mother was a student here, perhaps you remember Valina Sinclair?" He had no intention of revealing who her father was to the staff, so far only Minerva and Albus knew the full story of Holly's parentage. They could be trusted to keep silent, the others had a tendency to gossip, and the last thing Severus wanted was more publicity.

"Yes, of course!" exclaimed Flitwick, beaming. "She was one of my best charms students. A good lass, and she was good in potions too, if I recall correctly."

"You do."

"A pity that she died from a potions accident though," remarked Minerva sadly.

The rest of them nodded solemnly. Then Professor Sprout said, "But what will the children be doing since they cannot attend classes?"

"I have arranged my schedule so that I may tutor them in the afternoons, Pomona. Harry is old enough to begin some form of magical education and Holly I shall teach Muggle subjects. As you know, I am well-versed in both areas." The Potions Master replied. "Fear not, I have told them they are to stay away from your greenhouse."

Professor Sprout heaved a sigh. "Thank you, Severus. It's not that I mind them coming in to look around, but I don't want them getting hurt. Some of my plant species are carnivorous and dangerous."

"I will stress they stay away from your greenhouse, Pomona," said the professor. "They will have plenty to occupy them with their schoolwork and Hagrid has volunteered to watch them in the mornings when I have classes."

"Perhaps you ought to introduce the girl to Filch," suggested the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, a tall sallow blond fellow called Victor Throckmorton. "I'm sure they'd have a lot in common, since he can barely cast spells either. Perhaps he could show her how to clean the trophies and wax the floor." That last was said with a sly snigger and a smirk.

Severus shot the teacher a glare that should have fried Throckmorton where he sat. "What are you implying, Throckmorton? That she is no better than a servant because she is a Squib?"

Throckmorton shrugged insolently. "Aren't they all? Don't get all steamed, Snape. It was a joke," he added quickly, seeing Severus's eyes start to glitter with barely restrained temper.

"In poor taste!" snapped the Potions Master. "You will refrain from making such degrading comments in my presence, Throckmorton, or else you will learn why I was awarded a Master of Combat plaque last year." Snape's jaw was clenched so hard he could have broken a molar. "I did not bring her here to allow anyone to sneer at her or turn her into a glorified servant, the way you have done to Argus. She is my ward, and as such she will be treated respectfully, or else you will answer to me."

"Now, Severus-" began Dumbledore, trying to head off any nasty confrontation.

"Am I clear?" demanded the black-robed wizard implacably.

Throckmorton swallowed, for Severus's stare made him feel like a mouse standing before a hungry falcon, it stripped and shredded him to the bone. And, though he was a Defense teacher, he knew he was not in Severus's class, and he was suddenly afraid. "Yes. Point taken."

Satisfied that he had quelled any start of bigotry among the staff at least, Severus settled back in his chair and waited for the meeting to end. He would keep an eye on Throckmorton though, and tell Harry and Holly to avoid him, and warn Silver to be aware as well of the other's prejudice. Throckmorton's smug attitude grated on Severus's nerves and made him long to slug the man.

But after that bit of tension, the meeting went smoothly, and Severus hoped he would actually get back in time for lunch when he caught Dumbledore giving him a secret sign as the old wizard lifted his cup of tea. It was the old signal he used to use back when Severus was still a spy, to indicate he wished to speak with the Potions Master privately.

Severus bit back a sigh. It was clear that Albus wished to discuss Severus's little matter of Holly further. I may as well summon an elf and tell him to give Harry and Holly lunch, since I will no doubt be delayed. He made the countersign, and Albus coughed in response.

Then the old wizard dismissed the meeting and the teachers all rose and filed out of the room.

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"Was it truly necessary, my boy, to threaten Victor that way? The poor fellow nearly wet his robes, I think," Dumbeldore reprimanded softly, though Severus noted a twinkle hiding behind the half-moon spectacles. "Your reputation precedes you, Severus."

"Good, and don't expect me to apologize to the oaf either, Albus. I will not have him looking down his nose at Holly, she got enough of that from Lucius, and that is the last thing she needs. Do you know that her self-esteem was so damaged by Lucius's rejection and neglect that I have had to employ a Mind Healer for therapy sessions? Yes, Albus, a Mind Healer!"

"She is that badly off?"

Severus nodded grimly. "She believes she is worthless, Lucius made that quite clear to her when he shoved her into the street and turned his back on her. She is just beginning to trust me and consider the fact that she is worthy of being loved and I will not have smug asses like Throckmorton undoing her progress by passing nasty remarks about her."

"Poor child! I had not realized . . ." said Dumbledore sadly.

"Now you do, Albus. And mark me, if you do not keep him in check, I will."

"Severus, don't be hasty. I shall speak to Victor and make certain he keeps his opinions to himself."

"Humph! Perhaps you should never have hired him."

"There weren't too many candidates to choose from, and if I start discriminating over prejudiced beliefs I would barely have a staff left. Everyone is entitled to their own beliefs, Severus, you know that."

Though I don't agree with it, the prejudice against Squibs has been around for centuries."

"I know, Albus." Severus said coldly. "Regardless, I will not tolerate it among my colleagues. It is one thing to endure it among students, for I cannot discipline them all, but Throckmorton is an adult and should be able to exercise restraint in this matter."

"Quite true. Settle down, Severus. My carpet is quite worn as it is," Albus joked, and the Potions Master quit pacing and seated himself. "You are certain Lucius does not know where she is?"

"He may. Or not. But here is safer for her than my home. Here I can keep an eye on her and Harry."

"And does the child know that she is not the only Malfoy offspring?"

"No. Lucius was careful to keep his two lives separate. I'm sure Valina knew of Narcissa and Draco, but Holly does not."

"Will you tell her then?"

"Why, Albus? What possible good can come of it? For her to know that she has a half-brother who matters more in her father's eyes than she ever will? And don't tell me it might be good for her to know she has a family besides Lucius either. Draco has been raised in his father's shadow, he would be horrified to learn he has a half-sister who is a Squib. There would not be any kind of joyous reunion or whatever you were thinking, Albus. Lucius made it unconditionally clear to her that she was less than nothing to him, that he never loved her mother, and he valued her only for the magic she might have inherited. Meeting Draco or learning that he had another family that he lavished his time and money and affection on would only hurt her more. And she has been hurt enough." Severus steepled his fingers and said firmly, "I intend to demand that Lucius release all claims to her and thus allow me to adopt her eventually. I am her family now. And Harry. And no one insults my child and gets away with it."

"Peace, Severus!" Dumbledore held up his hands in surrender. "Your little one is safe. I doubt if Victor will come within ten meters of her

now." He chuckled. "I never realized you could be so fierce, like a falcon defending her chicks. And they aren't even your natural children."

Severus coughed uncomfortably. But he recovered swiftly, and said pointedly, "As if that matters! You of all people should know better, Albus Dumbledore! Did you weep any less when the plague took your adopted son Julian along with your wife and your daughter Felicia all those years ago? Did you say to yourself, it hurts less because my son was not of my blood? Minerva told me you were in mourning for over five years for all of them."

"That is so," the old wizard admitted, and in his eyes was an endless sorrow, though he had lost his family over thirty years ago, when a virulent magical plague had swept through Britain's wizarding community, before a cure was discovered. "To this day I regret not listening to Leanna and sending Julian away when she first showed signs of the plague. He might have survived, he was far stronger than she or Felicia was. . . but I was proud and he paid for my folly. When he died, I mourned him as if he were my own, you are right. Forgive me, I did not mean to imply that you did not bear a father's love for his children, Severus. I was simply . . . surprised that you could defend a child you hardly know so fiercely."

"I may not have known her long, Albus, but there is an . . .innocence and a . . . sweetness about her that I have not seen since . . .Lily and I were children. And no, I am not becoming a sentimental idiot. You will understand when you meet her. What surprises me the most is that she came from someone as jaded and perverted as Lucius. She is her mother's daughter. The only thing she inherited from Lucius is her looks."

"Is there a strong resemblance?"

"I would say yes. But I can put a working on her to disguise her somewhat, she dislikes resembling Lucius as much as he dislikes admitting she is his daughter."

"Good. That would be best, I think."

"If that is all you wished to discuss, I should be getting back to them." Severus said, somewhat impatiently.

"Of course, my boy. Would you mind if I visited later on?"

"No, come by around seven, by then they should have calmed down sufficiently to remember their manners." Severus said. Then he added, "And no bringing them any sweets, old fox!"

"But Severus, they're children . . ."

"Yes, and they don't need you feeding them sugar, they already eat too many sweets as it is. And I am too tired tonight to be dealing with hyper children, Albus."

"Not even a single bag of Fizzing Whizzbees?"

"Albus, if you value your Potion Master's sanity and the lives of your students . . ."

"Very well. No Fizzing Whizzbees."

"Or anything else," Severus countered, knowing how clever the other wizard was.

Dumbledore sighed, looking very much like a petulant eight-year-old. "All right. But if I happen to encounter them elsewhere . . ."

Severus bit back a groan. He had no doubt that by tomorrow night his two imps would be bouncing off the walls, courtesy of a sneaky old man who loved sweets as much as any child.

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After lunch with Severus, Harry and Holly visited Hagrid down by his cottage. Harry, familiar with the grounds from many weekends and nights spent at the castle, led Holly down the path with confidence. They passed several students coming to and fro from classes. Some waved hello to Harry and nodded at Holly too, others ignored them, and a few gave Holly odd looks, but no one said anything unkind.

Holly was quite relieved, given her past experience with other children, and thought that she would perhaps enjoy herself here after all. The giant man greeted Harry with a hug that lifted him off his feet.

"Hiya, Harry! Been a long time, eh?"

"Uh, yeah, I guess so, Hagrid. I haven't seen you since . . .before the holidays." Harry grinned, and the big man carefully set him down. "Hagrid, this is my foster sister, Holly. She'll be staying at Hogwarts with me and Dad for this term."

"ello, Holly. I'm Hagrid, the gamekeeper round here. Pleased to meet you." He held out a large meaty paw to her.

"Hello. Pleased to meet you too, sir," the little girl said respectfully, shaking the huge hand lightly. Oddly enough, though he was five times her height, Holly did not feel intimidated at all by the big man. He reminded her of an eager overgrown sheepdog pup.

"Ah, no need t'call me sir, Holly. Just plain Hagrid will do. Sir's for the professors."

"Or Dad, when you're in trouble," added Harry.

"Aye, that too," chuckled the gamekeeper. "Though I'll bet Holly ain't in half the trouble you are, Harry." He winked at the boy to show he was only teasing, but Harry just laughed. He knew he was a scamp, and didn't mind when people pointed it out to him. "Anyways, let's go down to the little corral here. I've got two unicorn mums an' their foals t'show you."

"Awesome!" exclaimed Harry.

"Neat! Can we pet them?" asked Holly.

"Yuh can, but first let 'em get usta you," cautioned Hagrid. "The unicorn mares can get kinda touchy if they don't know you an' you try an' touch their baby."

The big man led the way in back of his cottage to a large wooden corral. Inside were two gorgeous unicorn mares. Their coats sparkled in the sun, a white so pure that rainbows danced across the satin hide and their manes and tails were long and flowing like gossamer silk. They had large violet eyes and their horns were pearlescent spirals. Beside them trotted beautiful golden foals, their coats were the color of honey and they had lighter colored manes and tails and their horns were small nubs. But their eyes were large and liquid, filled with the innocence only a newborn could know.

"Oh!" was all Holly could manage, and for some reason she felt tears prick her eyes.

Harry too was affected that way, blinking rapidly. "Wow! They really are something."

"Pretty, aren't they?" Hagrid smiled. "They were born jus' last month an' still nursing, though they do like sugar and their mums like a bit of apple. Here," he handed both children a few lumps of sugar and an apple cut into pieces. "Go stand jus' inside the gate an' wait t'see what happens." He carefully unlatched the corral.

Harry and Holly went inside, but then Holly looked back at Hagrid and asked, "Hagrid, why are the babies golden and not white? Aren't all unicorns white?"

"They are when they're grown. But these are little yet an they're born gold. Their coats will lighten to pure white when they're six and mature. Kind of like spots on a fawn."

Holly nodded, that made sense. Then she stood with her hand outstretched, waiting for a unicorn to approach. She had a bit of apple on her palm.

Harry glanced over at her and whispered, "Wonder how long it'll be before one comes over to see what we've got?"

The girl shrugged. "I don't know. And don't really care. I could stand here all day." She gazed out at the living breathing magical creatures and felt herself falling in love.

"I know what you mean," Harry said, and held out sugar on his palm.

Ten minutes passed. Hagrid leaned on the gate, watching the two children with a broad smile on his face. He was impressed that the two youngsters displayed such patience. Some of the older students would not have been able to do so. Severus had taught them well, the gamekeeper thought.

From further away, just beyond the lawn, a great silver wolf watched as well, panting slightly. Silver knew he could not get too close to the corral, or else he might spook the unicorns, who were wary of any large predator, but he was pleased as well to see the two having a nice visit on their first day in the castle.

Suddenly, one of the mares quit grazing on the tender spring grass and approached Holly, her hooves making no sound over the grass. She glided, rather like a dancer, and one moment she was across the corral and the next standing in front of the little girl.

Holly did not move at all, remaining frozen as the mare lowered her head and breathed softly on her palm, her horn nearly touching the top of the girl's head. Come on, beautiful one! Take the apple! Take it! She urged silently, and then the mare did.

Her muzzle brushed Holly's palm, like the fluttering of butterfly wings, and the apple vanished down the mare's throat. Then the unicorn bobbed her head in thanks, and blew upon the girl.

Holly inhaled the sweet breath, it was fragrant with apples, and smiled. "You're welcome, my lady. May I . . . touch you?"

This time the unicorn laid her nose in Holly's palm and allowed her to stroke the silken white skin. Holly brushed only the tips of her fingers down the unicorn's face, afraid that somehow her touch might sully the brilliant creature. "I can't believe it. I'm really petting a unicorn!" she murmured, awestruck.

Next to her, Harry was petting the mare's little filly, who was slurping the sugar off his palm greedily and then sucking his fingers. "Hey,

that tickles!" he giggled, reaching out to stroke the fuzzy mane which stood straight up like bristles.

The foal butted him impatiently and squealed, wanting more sugar. Harry dug into a pocket and held out the other lump. "Here you go. Guess you like sweets as much as Professor Dumbledore and I do." He scratched the baby unicorn behind the ears and the little one sighed happily, crunched the sugar cube, and leaned into the boy's chest.

Harry cradled the filly's head to him and grinned, her coat was like velvet and she smelled like primroses. "You're a beauty, you are. You smell so good, like a spring breeze." Then he thought of something. "Hagrid, do the unicorns have names?"

"Ah, the mares do. The one you're petting, Holly is called Mist Dancer, on account she's so graceful. The other one is Moonlight Duchess, cause she's a proud one. But the babies I haven't named yet. Would ya like to help me out?"

"Yes, please." Holly said softly.

"Sure, Hagrid," agreed Harry.

"All righ'. You each name one."

Harry continued petting the filly, chewing his lower lip. The filly reminded him of a bouquet of fresh flowers, sweet and pretty. "Uh . . .how about . . .Primrose Bouquet? She smells like primroses. Or does that sound stupid?"

"That's a good name, Harry." Holly said.

"Aye, I like it. She's a sweet little lass," agreed Hagrid.

Dancer lifted her head and neighed in approval. And thus the filly was called Primrose Bouquet, Rose for short.

Holly was still stroking Dancer when Duchess trotted over to inspect the children and her filly followed.

Duchess nudged the other mare aside and stood looking imperiously down at Holly, then she too blew in the girl's face and allowed her to stroke her mane and along her muzzle.

"You're a fine lady, aren't you?" Holly observed. She fed Duchess an apple as well.

Then the small filly came and nuzzled her for sugar, and Holly obliged. The sugar was taken daintily from her hand, but then the foal lingered and Holly scratched behind her ears like Harry had done. "I think . . .I think . . .I'd name you . . .Moonsilver Magic. Lady Moonsilver Magic, because your mum's a duchess," Holly corrected, and the proud mare nodded her head and whickered in agreement.

"That's a terrific name, Holl." Harry said, and gave her a thumbs up sign. Then he went back to petting Rose.

There came a loud cough from behind them, and Hagrid turned to see who it was. "Ah, good afternoon, Professor Throckmorton. What can I do for ya?"

The Defense teacher pursed his lips and glared over the fence at the two children. "Is it school policy now to allow . . .a child like that to touch unicorns?" he pointed at Holly, his mouth curling in distaste.

"Aw, they ain't doin' no 'arm, sir. The mares like youngsters, y'know. Specially the girls." Hagrid said, a bit puzzled. "Why? What's wrong with Holly?"

Throckmorton arched an eyebrow in disbelief. Then he leaned in and whispered, "You mean you don't know? She's a Squib. A magicless freak who should not even be allowed here, in my opinion."

Hagrid stiffened, he did not particularly like the Defense professor. "That's not for you t'say, Professor. Now, was there something I can help ya with?"

"Yes, I need several doxies, I am doing a unit with them for my third-years," Throckmorton said haughtily.

"Not a problem, sir. How many do you need?"

"About two dozen, I think."

"An' make sure you've got plenty of Doxycide and antivenom too," Hagrid offered helpfully. "Them doxies pack a nasty bite an' you wouldn't want a student to get badly hurt."

"I'll thank you not to tell me how to conduct my lessons, Hagrid," said the other wizard stiffly. Then he asked through gritted teeth, "Where might I obtain some anti-venom and such?"

"Oh, just ask Professor Snape. He keeps a store of potions and stuff in his lab."

Throckmorton looked less than pleased, but said nothing, instead scowling at Holly. "Allowing a Squib to take such liberties with a unicorn! Outrageous!"

He had meant to say that under his breath, but it came out louder than he intended and Holly and Harry could not help overhearing it.

Holly hung her head, all of the old inadequate feelings welling up within her. Even here, she did not fit in, and all of her joy in the unicorns evaporated like frost in the sunshine. She immediately quit petting Magic.

Harry eyed Holly in concern, seeing how her face had turned red in embarrassment and she was looking down at the ground and he spun around and glared daggers at the teacher. Severus had taught him to be polite and mannerly to adults, but this one had just insulted his sister for no reason and Harry was furious. "Don't you talk that way about my sister!" he cried. "She's got as much right to be here as you do, mister!"

Throckmorton looked down his nose and drawled icily, "You have some nerve, addressing me thus, boy. Do you know who I am?"

"No, and I don't care," Harry replied insolently.

"I am Professor Throckmorton and you are dangerously close to getting a detention Mr.-?"

"Snape," Harry supplied. "You can't give me detention, I'm not a student here yet."

"I should have known. Only a relation of the Potions professor would have such ill manners and insolence. Like father, like son," sneered Throckmorton, and he reached over the fence to grab Harry's ear. "Well, I don't put up with that impudent behavior from any child, professor's son or no. You need a good lesson in manners, boy, and I'm going to give you one you'll not soon forget." His hand almost closed upon Harry's ear.

A terrible growl came from behind him.

Throckmorton froze, the blood surging in his veins, at the menacing sound, hardly daring to turn around.

He came face to face with a gigantic silver wolf, who was snarling angrily.

"Name of Merlin! Where did that creature come from?" he cried, reaching for his wand.

"That's Harry's wolf-dog, Silver," Hagrid answered. "Best watch yerself, sir, he don' take kindly to anyone layin' a hand on his family."

Silver continued to growl, all his fur standing up.

Throckmorton backed up, he was secretly terrified of dogs, having been bitten badly by a husky when he was a small child. "Call it off, damn you! Before I hex it."

"You hurt Silver and my dad will use you for potion ingredients," yelled Harry.

"Mind your own business, you infernal whelp!" snapped the Defense teacher, and he started to climb into the corral.

Only to find that the two mares were not willing to allow him entry.

They had nudged their foals and the two children behind them and stood with heads lowered and horns out, in front of them, and they snorted warningly.

Throckmorton, no fool, recognized an attack stance and looked up at Hagrid, shocked. "What's wrong with them? Unicorns never attack wizards."

"Unless they feel threatened, Professor. An' you threatened to hurt a child. They don't take kindly to that at all, sir."

Throckmorton carefully put a foot on the ground, and Duchess half-reared and shrilled angrily, stamping a hoof and tossing her horn in warning. The wizard backed up, for Dancer was also neighing angrily and advancing on him, horn lowered, and pointed right at his midsection.

Throckmorton gulped, there was nothing docile or gentle about the unicorns now.

"I'd get outta there if I were you, sir. They don't seem t'like you for some reason," remarked Hagrid, trying not to laugh.

"B-but what about that dog?" sputtered Throckmorton, panicking.

Silver growled again, looking as if he would like to make mincemeat out of the teacher.

"Call it off, I tell you! Right now!" ordered the wizard.

"Can't do that, sir. He only listens to Professor Snape an' Harry."

"You-boy! Call this beast off this instant. Before I report it to the Society for Dangerous Creatures."

"Silver's not a dangerous creature, just mad at you," Harry said from behind the shield of unicorns. "He won't bite unless you hurt one of us."

"Call it off, I say!"

"Will you apologize to my sister?" bargained Harry, greatly daring.

Throckmorton nearly had a seizure. The sheer cheek of the boy! Oh, how he wished he had five minutes alone with the rotten little brat and a switch, so he could teach the boy the error of his ways. But Hogwarts did not allow corporal punishment like Durmstrang, he thought balefully. He shuddered as the beast bared his teeth at him. Feeling himself start to shake, he cried, "Fine! I apologize. Now tell this . . . wolf or whatever to leave me be!"

Harry smirked. "Okay. Silver! Stand down, boy."

Silver whuffed, then obediently backed off and sat down in the grass a few feet away, still eyeing Throckmorton like a juicy piece of meat.

The Defense teacher quickly climbed back over the fence and swiftly departed, muttering balefully under his breath, his red robes swishing about his ankles.

"Huh! Good riddance!" muttered Hagrid. "He's got some attitude problems, he does."

"Who is he, Hagrid?" Harry asked, coming out from behind the wall of unicorns.

"Professor Victor Throckmorton, the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. He's originally from Durmstrang, an' I guess they do things different over there. He ain't one to cross, Harry, so best you an' Holly stay away from him, y'hear?"

"Yes, I hear you," Harry said, and beckoned Holly to him.

She came and leaned against his shoulder. "I'm sorry, Harry."

"For what?"

"Ruining your good time."

"You didn't ruin anything, that idiot Pockmuckle did," Harry said, putting an arm around her.

"But you might get in trouble for defending me."

"I didn't hit him and he started it. Hagrid was a witness."

"That's right. Listen to me, lass. You ain't to blame fer the attitudes o' some people. Some people are jus' plain stupid an' cruel, even if they have a fancy degree an' all. Take that there Throckmorton. He's from the old school, thinking that Squibs an' Muggleborns are beneath 'im. But he sure learned different when Dancer and Duchess threatened him, eh? A unicorn's one of the best judges o' character I know, they can tell who's good an' who's not, lass. An as you saw for yerself, they think you're worthy of bein' a friend of theirs, Holly, an' not many people can say that, wizard or otherwise."

"Really, Hagrid?" Holly stared at him.

"Unicorns don't lie, lass." Hagrid said, and beckoned them out of the corral. He patted Holly clumsily on the shoulder. "You're always welcome here, lass. You and your brother. Right, ladies?"

All the unicorns neighed, then they tossed their heads and returned to grazing and playing.

"Thank you," Holly called, and a warm glow spread through her. Guess it's like Healer Sue says, you got to take the good with the bad.

Harry knelt and hugged Silver. "Thanks for sticking up for us, boy. You're a good wolf-dog."

Silver gave a soft bark and licked Harry's face.

* * * * *

When they told Severus later on that night of their afternoon adventure, he was furious-with Throckmorton. "I wish I had known of this before he came to me and asked me for some of my potions supplies," the Potions Master grumbled. "I'd have told him to go brew his own, the insufferable ass!"

Harry snickered.

"Don't provoke him, but if he approaches you again, Harry or Holly, walk away and come find me. I'm usually in my classroom all day, or here in my lab, so don't hesitate to come in. He won't follow you down here. I will definitely have another talk with him," he said grimly. "Stay together, you two, and keep Silver near you as well, if possible." He turned to Holly. "Holly, if anyone starts harassing you among the students, I want you to find a teacher immediately. They will help you, all except Throckmorton, that is. If you can't find a teacher, call Silver. He should be enough to intimidate any student. I don't want you to be afraid here, I want you to think of this as your home for the term, and I will do my best to make you feel safe here. The students all know that you are my ward, I told them this afternoon, and they shouldn't bully you, and I will deal with Throckmorton."

"Yeah, kick his backside, Dad," Harry said.

"You leave Throckmorton to me, son. Promise me you will not antagonize him, Harry."

"I promise," Harry said quickly, for Throckmorton gave him the creeps, and he knew he was no match for the older man.

Just then there was a knock on the door. "That will be the Headmaster, come to visit," Severus announced, and waved a hand at the door.

It opened to reveal Albus in his favorite purple moon and stars robe, his beard neatly bound by a silver cord, his blue eyes twinkling merrily. "Good evening, Severus. I trust your first classes of the term went well."

"As well as could be expected. No one exploded any cauldrons," replied the Potions Master. "Of course, that's because I didn't have first years today. Tomorrow might be a different story."

"Never a dull moment in potions," Albus remarked, stepping into the room. "Welcome back, Harry, my boy." He greeted Harry, beaming down on him. "Looks like you get to start school a bit early."

"Hello, Professor Dumbledore. Dad says it's good to get a head start."

"Yes, he's quite right, my boy. I'm sure you will be at the top of your classes, like your father was when he attended here." Then he turned to Holly, who had been standing off to one side, uncertain of what to expect from this new adult wizard. "And you must be Severus' daughter, Holly, is that right?"

"I . . ." Holly looked up at Severus, uncertain.

"It's all right, little one. Albus knows who you are and how someday I intend to adopt you."

"Oh. Then yes, sir, my name is Holly and I'm Severus' foster daughter." She gave the old wizard a tentative smile.

Albus reached out a hand and smiled at her. "Welcome, little one, to Hogwarts. I hope that you find your stay here a pleasant one." Severus was right. There is very little of her father in her, save in her physical aspect. The rest . . . she truly is an innocent, I can see it in her eyes. She reminds me of Felicia. He had tried to avoid comparing any young student of his to his deceased daughter over the years, for such would only bring him pain. She had died too soon, she had only been nine. He felt the same feelings of protectiveness for this child as he had for his own. "Have you seen the unicorn foals yet?"

"Yes, sir. Hagrid showed them to us first thing," Holly said.

"We were having a great time, we even got to name them," Harry related, following Dumbledore to the sofa in the living area. "Until that

mean Professor Throckmorton showed up and said Holly ought to keep away from the unicorns."

Dumbledore frowned. "Why?"

"Because I'm a Squib and shouldn't be allowed here," Holly answered. "He said Squibs shouldn't be allowed to touch a unicorn, that it was outrageous."

For the first time in a long time, Severus saw his old mentor become angry. The old man drew himself up and his blue eyes flashed chained lightning and he said in a soft cold voice, "He said that, did he? After my discussion with him? It would seem he needs a more pointed reminder of who is in charge in this school."

Severus concealed a smirk. Throckmorton, you fool. You have cooked your own goose. It is never wise to anger one such as Albus Dumbledore. He may have a slow fuse, but once it is lit, it can cause destruction in an eyeblink. But you shall learn that to your sorrow. Severus settled down in his recliner, and summoned a house elf to bring them some tea, hot cocoa, and shortbread from the kitchens.

"But Dad's gonna kick his backside," Harry put in, and Severus sighed.

"Harry-"

"What? It's true, and he deserves it," his son said bluntly.

"You may have to stand in line, Severus." The Headmaster remarked, and his eyes glittered. Albus turned to the children and said, "Pay no attention to him, he is full of hot air and babbles nonsense. You are my guest and a family member of one of my staff, Holly, and as such Hogwarts is always open to you. You are not the first Squib to walk these halls."

"I'm not?"

"No, there have been others. One is still among us, his name is Argus Filch and he has been steward of this castle for some fifty-odd years,

I believe." Dumbledore said. "The most he can do with his magic is light a candle. Well, that and bond with his familiar, a striped cat named Mrs. Norris."

"All I can do is see in fire," Holly admitted.

"A Seer? That is a rare gift. How many times have you predicted true, child?"

"Only once so far, sir. I Saw Severus and Harry rescue me from the snow."

"A very useful gift. And now, let us have some shortbread and tea," said the old wizard, as a house elf appeared with a pop with a silver serving tray.

They spent the rest of the evening companionably, discussing new class schedules, the latest Quidditch final, since Harry was a Quidditch fanatic, various magical creatures, and experimental potions until Albus declared he must be going. "These old bones aren't what they used to be, and I'm afraid I need my rest."

"it was good of you to visit, Albus." Severus said cordially. "Bid the Headmaster good evening, children."

The two obeyed, and Dumbledore held out his arms for a hug. Harry went to him immediately, and the Headmaster whispered, "If you need anything or want to find some sweets, the password to my office is Strawberry Shortcake."

"Okay, sir. Thanks."

Then the old man tucked a handkerchief into Harry's pocket. "For later. Don't tell your father."

Harry hid a grin. Dumbledore was forever sneaking him forbidden sweets.

Then he stepped back and Holly found herself being enfolded in the old wizard's robe gently. "Good night, Holly." He also told her the password, and slipped her a handkerchief as well.

"Thank you, sir."

Then he bid the Potions Master good evening and departed, smirking like a naughty schoolboy. You made me promise no Fizzing Whizzbees Severus, but you never said I couldn't give them handkerchiefs. And if I happened to forget that they had Chocolate Frogs inside them, ah well, when you're three-hundred and fifty-two, you tend to overlook things. Except there was one thing he would not overlook, and that was Throckmorton. His smirk vanished abruptly and he strode down the corridor with a stern look on his face that would have sent a Death Eater fleeing for cover. When he had become Headmaster he had vowed that the school would be a haven for those who had no other home, like Squibs and blood traitors and he would not be foresworn.

Hope you all enjoyed this one.

I decided to do a different take on Dumbledore here. How did you like the unicorns?

Next: Holly meets Mrs. Norris and Filch while looking for Harry.

The Other Squib

Filch had just finished mopping up the mess left by a student who had dropped several bottles of ink all over the corridor next to Throckmorton's office. It had taken him over an hour even with Ink Gone solution, to scrub the flagstones free of ink. He straightened slowly, these days his joints ached worse than ever in the cold and damp, and the castle was always somewhat drafty. He set aside his brush and pail, wiping his forehead with a damp rag. Damn lazy good-for-nothing kids! Always making more work for me. Should have made sure the ink was stoppered correctly and in a case. That was what we were taught, back in my day. Why if I'd wasted that much expensive ink, I'd have gotten the hide stripped off of me. Kids these days have no appreciation for what things cost. Spoiled, all of 'em.

His familiar, Mrs. Norris, appeared and wound her skinny body around his ankles, purring rustily. "Ah, how's my girl?" Argus crooned, kneeling to stroke the cat's back. He always found her purring soothing to his nerves. He had learned long ago that when people rejected you for being born without magic, an animal never would.

The cat's purring increased, until her striped ribcage vibrated, and Argus scratched her beneath the chin. "Did ye have a nice hunt then, my beauty?"

The cat rubbed herself along his leg in answer, her yellow eyes half-lidded.

Suddenly, Filch caught the sound of raised voices coming from the direction of Throckmorton's office. One voice he recognized as the Defense professor, and his lip curled. He had met the Durmstrang wizard just once, at the beginning of the year, and Throckmorton had made it clear that he considered speaking with Squibs a great concession. Filch disliked him intensely, and whenever he cleaned the DADA classroom, he never did quite as good a job on it as he did on the Transfiguration classroom or the Potions classroom.

But it was the second voice that made Filch nearly topple over.

For the second voice was unmistakably Albus Dumbledore's and he was clearly quite peeved at the other man.

Unable to restrain his curiosity, Filch rose and crept over to the closed office door. He knew quite well that what he was about to do was the height of bad manners, but his curiosity was killing him. He could count on one hand the times Albus had ever raised his voice to someone on his staff, much less given a teacher a thorough dressing down.

Concealing a gleeful smirk, Argus pressed his ear to the door.

* * * * *

" . . . I had thought I had made it quite clear to you, Mister Throckmorton, that you were to tend to your classes and not concern yourself with the guests I had invited to the school," Albus said, his blue eyes flashing.

Throckmorton eyed the Headmaster with a barely disguised sneer and said stiffly, "I did not seek the girl out, if that is what you are implying. I discovered her inside the corral with the unicorn foals when I went down to Hagrid's to procure some doxies. It was then that I saw her and her insolent brat of a brother petting the unicorns. She was polluting the unicorn with her touch, Headmaster! Such a thing would never have been permitted at Durmstrang."

"But, Mr. Throckmorton," Albus said through gritted teeth, clearly the man was like a stone wall, all his attempts at gentle persuasion had failed. Perhaps a direct approach was best. "We are not at Durmstrang, we are at Hogwarts. And in my tenure as Headmaster, I have tried to eliminate needless prejudice towards Squibs, Muggleborns, and half-bloods. They serve no purpose and only antagonize and reopen old wounds."

Throckmorton snorted. "Ah, I know, you are the great liberator, the champion of the downtrodden, Albus Dumbledore. You cheapen your student body by allowing all sorts of people to attend and be employed here. A half-giant gamekeeper, a failed Seer, a Squib steward, a half-blood professor. Why, I have even heard rumors that

you once adopted a half-breed boy. Apparently he was part sprite, or at least that is what they say."

Dumbledore felt his temper start to slip its leash when Throckmorton mentioned Julian, the child he had loved and lost years ago, but had somehow never stopped missing. "And do you listen to gossip often, Throckmorton? Because if so you might find it has a nasty way of turning back upon you when you least expect it. Yes, my son was a half-sprite, he had been abandoned as a baby and I and my wife were the only wizarding family willing to raise such a child. And he was smarter and stronger in magic than many a child from a pureblood family. But that is neither here nor there." He drew himself up, and glowered down upon the younger man. "When I employed you, sir, I did so knowing you harbored certain prejudices towards minorities. I also did so knowing you had been in trouble with your previous employer for being "too strict" with a student. But I figured that you were willing to work with me and deserved a second chance to make something of yourself. All of us deserve a second chance. But-"

"I was not aware my beliefs were on trial here, Headmaster. And was it not you who told me that my past did not matter?" interrupted the Defense teacher.

"Do not interrupt me, Throckmorton!" snapped Dumbledore. "Your past does not matter so long as you do not repeat the mistakes that led to your near dismissal from Durmstrang. I forbid you to raise a hand towards a child here, and I also forbid you to humiliate Holly Sinclair. She has done nothing to warrant such treatment, and as a guest she is under my protection."

"You claim that I am allowed to speak my mind, and then you scold me like a child when I do so!" exclaimed Throckmorton angrily. "You are nothing more than a hypocrite! Squibs are the dregs of society, everyone knows that. Good only for manual labor. Where I come from, they are not even allowed a vote on the Wizard Council, nor are they allowed to attend school with normal wizard children. Since that girl set foot here, I have been threatened bodily by your Potions Master, and you simply sat there and allowed him to abuse me! Where then is the fair play in that, Dumbledore?"

"Severus reacted the way any father would if someone insulted his child. And he issued a warning, he did not harm you, Throckmorton."

"Lucky for him! I have powerful friends in the Ministry, Dumbledore. And if Snape had attacked me, I would have had him arrested and charged with assault before you could say Avada Kedavra! So best you keep your pet Potions Master on a leash, sir!"

"An empty threat, Throckmorton." Dumbledore said coldly. "You forget, I am a prominent Ministry official myself, and I would vouch for Severus any day of the week. Lucius Malfoy might have sponsored you, but you have no authority here, Victor Throckmorton. That still belongs to me and thus I shall tell you once more-live and let live, Mr. Throckmorton! Leave Holly Sinclair and her brother alone, it is not your place to instruct them, discipline them, or otherwise involve yourself in their lives. This is Britain and we do not persecute innocents here-have I made myself clear?" he thundered that last word, and lightning sizzled in his gaze, making Throckmorton jump and cringe like a terrified animal.

He opened his mouth to speak, but Dumbledore pointed a finger and a blue streak shot from it and wrapped about Throckmorton's mouth. "Silence! I am not finished yet! Should I find that you have broken your promise to me yet again, Mr. Throckmorton, you will be leaving the school immediately, your contract terminated, and you will be lucky if you walk out of here on two feet. Perhaps a few months as a rat shall teach you some much needed humility. Understand?"

The other wizard nodded mutely, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down, his eyes wide and frightened. He had thought Dumbledore a meek mild old man, one who did not exercise his authority and was a pushover. But this wizard was none of those things, indeed he was terrifying. Throckmorton could feel the power surging in the room, it made all his hair stand on end, it was as if he were in the center of a hurricane, held at bay by a single thread. Dumbledore's aura fairly crackled with raw magic, more than the younger wizard had ever seen wielded by a person before. Not even Igor Karkaroff had radiated such power.

Only then did Victor Throckmorton comprehend what he had unleashed, as he huddled behind his desk, looking into the burning cold eyes of the only wizard Voldemort had ever feared. Gone was the cheerful old man who loved sweets, in his place was a fearsome warrior mage, one who could hurl down fiery mountains and call up tornadoes and stop an avalanche with a single word.

And he found himself shivering, as frightened as he had been when a dog had bitten him as a six-year-old.

Abruptly, the silencing ribbon vanished and Throckmorton found he could speak again.

The first words out of his mouth were, "Understood, sir. I will not come near them again, I swear upon my wand."

"Very good, my boy," Dumbledore said calmly, the lightning in his eyes flickering and dying, and replaced by that vaguely befuddled look he usually wore. "I trust you will keep your word."

"I will, Headmaster," promised Throckmorton, trembling slightly. Inwardly he was howling and cursing himself for a coward, but he did not dare cross the other wizard. He had seen firsthand that the grandfatherly façade Dumbledore presented to the world concealed a dragon within.

"Excellent. Then I trust I shall not need to have this discussion again." Dumbledore said, and gave the other man a nod. "Oh, and by the way, you should expect a visit from Professor Snape as well. I trust you will remain civil and not threaten to duel him, Victor? For I should hate to have to go looking for a replacement Defense teacher this late in the term. So do try and remember that, won't you?"

"Yes, sir," he said through gritted teeth. The damnable twinkle was back in the elder wizard's eyes, Throckmorton noted irritably. And he had in effect been told to let Snape verbally thrash him, he thought sullenly. This job sucked, it was not at all the cushy post he had been promised by Lucius. It was typical of his luck. I hate children. Especially whiny tattling Squibs and impudent whelps like that Snape

boy. They all should be beaten till they howl and then thrown to wolves.

"Good evening then, Victor. Lemon drop?" Albus inquired, holding out one on his hand.

"No thank you, sir. Good evening."

Dumbledore nodded and swept towards the fireplace, leaving a sulky and fuming Defense Against the Dark Arts professor sitting stunned in his chair, and a delighted and amazed Argus Filch standing in the corridor.

"Blimey, pretty girl! Guess Albus told the bugger a thing or two, eh?" chuckled Filch, and Mrs. Norris meowed in agreement. "Good old Albus! He really is a true friend."

Then he scooped up Mrs. Norris and waltzed away down the corridor, happier than he had felt in months.

* * * * *

A few days afterward, Holly was heading down to the library, intending to check out a book Severus had recommended in the Magical Creatures section about unicorns, how to feed and care for them, and the true stories versus the myths and legends. Harry had gone to play Quidditch with the Weasley twins, he had asked if Holly wanted to watch, but she had told him no. Watching people flying was not fun, and she knew she didn't have magic enough to fly a broom herself, so instead she opted to read.

Severus was in class and Silver outside in the forest somewhere, but Holly was not afraid of meeting anyone in the castle save Throckmorton, whom Severus had assured her had his backside kicked most thoroughly by both Albus and himself. Just thinking about that made her smile. It was nice to have someone who cared looking out for her again. Better hurry and get that book, Holly. Before it gets too late for you to read it. You've got lessons with Severus and therapy with Healer Sue this afternoon, she reminded herself. And you have to find Harry too. She clutched her map and the little disk

Severus had given her, which would allow her to check a book out of the library.

She was to show the disk to Madam Pince, he had instructed, and she would be able to assist Holly in finding the unicorn book. "The library is very large and some of the books are not arranged alphabetically, but Madam Pince will know exactly where the book you want is. Once you have it, go and find your brother, it's almost time for his potions lesson with me. I have one more class to teach before my free period."

Holly had set off, promising she would bring Harry back as soon as possible. She found the library quite easily, the map led her directly to it, and Madam Pince sniffed, looked at the black disk Holly had presented, and said the book had to be returned within fourteen days. Then she waved her wand and a book suddenly appeared on her desk. "This one is what you're looking for," she said, indicating a lovely volume bound in green leather with a beautifully illustrated cover accented in golden sparkles. "Please take care with this, it's my only copy and it is over a hundred years old."

Holly looked at the book in awe before taking it reverently. "Yes, ma'am. I'll wash my hands before I read it. How come the pages aren't falling apart if it's that old?"

"Preserving spell on the parchment, of course," said Madam Pince.

"Oh. Right. Well, thank you very much, Madam Pince."

"You are welcome, Miss Snape. Run along now and mind you return the book on time."

"Thank you, I shall!" Holly called, hugging the book to her and skipping out of the library. She was so excited about the book that she didn't even bother to correct the librarian about her name. She didn't really mind the mistake anyway, she wanted to be a Snape. Severus had even cast a charm on her that changed her platinum hair to a darker golden brown and altered the shape of her nose and chin so that her resemblance to her father was less pronounced. She

was much happier now, for she looked more like her mother, who had always loved her.

She consulted the map again and discovered the quickest way out of the castle was down the right hand corridor. She was trying to walk quickly and look at the map at the same time and so didn't notice that the floor had just been mopped and the one who was doing the mopping was just ahead of her, swishing the mop with a vengeance while a striped tabby sat atop an overturned bucket, her tail tucked neatly about her white feet.

One minute Holly was walking and the next she was skidding across the floor on her bottom, to crash right into the mop-wielding Argus Filch.

"Bloody hell!" yelled the startled steward. "Can't you kids ever watch where you're going?"

Holly looked up at the annoyed man, blushing. "Sorry, sir! I didn't notice the floor was wet, I was trying to find my brother. He's got potions soon and Dad doesn't like it when he's late for a lesson." She looked ruefully down at herself, her bottom was wet and so were the backs of her jeans. But at least the book was safe, she had held onto it for dear life. "Maybe next time you could put up a sign," she suggested, slowly climbing to her feet.

Filch snorted. "A sign? You have eyes, girl, you should learn to use 'em."

"Yes, but a sign would have made me watch out for wet floors." Holly argued. "You could get one in a thrift store, they sell them cheap there. They're made of plastic and say Caution! Wet Floor! Then kids won't slip and crash into you so much."

Filch started to snap at her, but then he took another look and realized what she said made sense. "Humph! Maybe I will."

Holly stood up gingerly and brushed futilely at her wet seat. "Darn! Now I'm going to have to go change once I get back home."

"Don't you know a Drying Charm yet?" asked Filch.

"No, sir. I can't cast spells." Holly replied softly.

Filch narrowed his eyes. "Can't cast spells? But all the kids here are wizards except . . ."

"Except me." Holly said.

"You're Snape's ward, aren't you? The one he found in the snow in Diagon Alley, right?"

"Yes. I'm Holly Sinclair." She held out a hand. "Pleased to meet you . . .?"

"Argus Filch. But you just call me Mr. Filch." Argus supplied. He studied the little girl closely, for he had not met many other Squibs, and never one so young.

"Oh! You're a Squib too. Professor Dumbledore told me that."

"Aye," Filch admitted quietly. "Though it's not something I like to advertise, you know what I mean?"

Holly nodded in understanding. "'Cause then they make fun of you and call you a freak and stuff."

Filch suppressed a wince, for the girl's matter-of-fact tone recalled unpleasant memories of a time long ago, when a skinny shy boy had been surrounded by other wizard children and taunted and poked with sticks and mocked until he burst into tears and ran away home, only to face the wrath of his father for cutting school. He flinched again, remembering his father's accusation of being a coward and shaming the family even further. Those words had hurt more than the switching he'd gotten afterwards, knowing that his father thought he was a disgrace and not fit to be his son. Even after all those years, they still stung.

"Forty years and nothing's changed," he muttered, half to himself. "Those of us born without magic's blessing are cursed indeed."

"Cursed?"

"Aye, or so my father always told me."

"Sounds kind of like my father. Only he said I was worthless and good-for-nothing. And that I wasn't his daughter."

Her words conjured more memories. Himself at sixteen, returning home after a stay in St. Mungos, having almost blown himself up trying to make a potion that was supposed to give a Squib the gift of magic so then his father would be proud of him, only to be summoned into Father's study and told he was to leave. "It's obvious to us all that you'll never develop magic if you haven't by now, Argus. And I cannot hold my post as Ambassador to the French Ministry with a Squib child hanging onto my robes. You are old enough to make your own way in the world, you can learn a trade at least. Here, take this bag of Galleons and this cloak, it was your grandfather's. Now go upstairs and pack, you can bid your mother and sister goodbye tomorrow morning."

Those were the last words his father had ever spoken to him, Argus thought bitterly. He had left home the next morning and never seen his family again. They were probably better off without him, he had thought then. He had always been an embarrassment, the only child in the family who couldn't cast a spell to save his life. It was only years later that he came to realize that he had been mistreated, that he never should have been sent away, like an unwanted pair of shoes.

"That's what they all think, them high and mighty wizard folk," he burst out angrily, seeing in the girl an echo of the lost boy he had once been. "They forget though, we came from them! And but for a twist of fate, they could have been like us!"

"You're right. I never thought about it like that before."

"Aye, well, I've had plenty of time t'think on it, seeing as I'm a bit older than you, lass."

"Can you do anything at all with the little magic you've got, Mr. Filch?"

"Some. I can light a candle and sometimes I can call Mrs. Norris from across the castle, but that's all. And you?" He indicated the cat sitting calmly on the bucket.

"I can See in fire. Sometimes. My mum said it was a rare gift and it made me special."

"Tis so. Where be your mother now?"

"She died. In a potions accident. That's how come I'm living with Severus and Harry."

"The professor's a decent sort." Filch grunted, returning to mopping the floor. "He don't sneer at me and he helps me patrol the halls at night, make sure all the students are in bed and not up to mischief. But guess that's 'cause he's a half-blood himself. Us outcast sorts flock together."

"But not all wizards are bad. My mum was a witch and she loved me even though I couldn't do real magic. And Harry likes me all right and so does Hagrid and Professor Dumbledore. He told me I'm always welcome here."

"There are a few good ones," Filch admitted. "But not too many. You were lucky, girl, that Harry found you and not someone else."

"It wasn't luck. It was more like . . . destiny. You see, I Saw it in a match flame, that I would either die and go to heaven with mum, or be rescued by Harry and Severus. And that's what happened."

"You Saw true? At your age?" Filch gaped at her. "That's a powerful rare gift you've got, girlie. The Divination teacher here can't even do that."

"But I thought you had to be a Seer in order to teach that class."

"That's how it should be, but Sybill Trelawney ain't had a real Seeing in I don't know when. She's another of the Headmaster's hard luck cases. Like Hagrid. And me. And you too."

"He's a great wizard, everyone says so. So why does he care about Squibs like us?"

Filch shrugged. "It's just his way. He supports the ones who need him most. He used to have a family too, once upon a time."

"What happened to them? Did they kick him out?"

"No. His wife and two kids died from the Great Plague back in 1955. An' his son Julian was a half-breed, part sprite, that he and his wife Leanna adopted. I think that's why he fights so hard for people like me. He does it in memory of his son."

"Did you know him then? Dumbledore's son?"

"Aye. Julian Albus Dumbledore was his name. And he was as full of mischief as a pixie and strong in magic. Got that from bein' part sprite, I suppose, since sprites are born magic. But his father loved him, even when Julian drove him crazy with his pranks. Made Albus laugh, sometimes, and other times made him want to rip out his hair. But he was soft on the kid, couldn't bring himself to punish him most times, even if it was deserved. Only gave him one spanking an' it were 'cause of me."

"Why?"

"Julian was about five then an' was having a birthday and Albus invited me to it. But the kid threw a fit and said only people with magic could come. He picked up that attitude from school, see, but Albus wouldn't put up with it. He tried to reason with the kid, but Julian could be stubborn as an oak root and he wouldn't listen to anything Albus said. Finally Julian went too far, called me a dirty Squib and Albus lost his temper and tanned his backside. Told me later he felt so bad he nearly cried, but the kid learned his lesson." Filch shook his head. "Julian was a scamp, but you couldn't help liking him. Just about killed Albus when he died, we all thought he was gonna make it, see,

and coming so quick after losing his wife an' little daughter, Felicia . . . He started to get better, or so we thought, but then . . . he looked at Albus one morning and said, "I'm sorry, Papa. I'm so tired . . ." and he died. He'd been using glamours to make believe he was better, so Albus wouldn't worry. He was real good at them, since he was half-sprite."

Holly sniffled. "That's awful! Poor Professor Dumbledore!"

"Aye. It were a bad time, lass. A bad time. The plague took one in ten wizards, I think, and the only ones who were immune to it were those who'd had it and lived or Squibs. First time I actually was glad I didn't have magic. I worked in the hospital then, taking care of them that were took sick. Hardly got any thanks for it, mind, but I did it for Albus. The school closed then, and I didn't need to work. First time ever those wizards didn't look at me as if I were dirt. 'Course that didn't last too long."

"How come? You saved their lives, right?"

"Sure, but here's the thing. Those I saved were grateful for it, but they didn't like owing their lives to the likes of me. So, once the plague passed, it was back to being nothing but a Squib again."

"But that's not fair!"

"Who ever said life was fair, girl? You know as well as I it ain't. Else you'd be living home with your father instead of here."

"Maybe. But living with Severus is a lot better than living with my real father. All he cared about was my inheriting his magic. Severus says . . . he says my dad's an ass and he threw away the best treasure ever."

"You hang on to him, lass. If there's one thing I learned it's that true friends in this world are rarer than a leprechaun carrying true gold. And when you find one, best you hold onto him tight. 'Cause you can't trust wizards normally. The only ones you can depend on are

yourself and your familiar. Animals are loyal, they don't care what you are." He cast a fond look over at Mrs. Norris. "Right, my beauty?"

Mrs. Norris jumped into his arms and purred. Filch cradled her and his craggy face softened. "Get yourself a cat, young lady. Severus won't mind it, not after that great beast of a dog. Then you'll have everything you'll ever want."

Holly reached out to pet the tabby, when suddenly the bell rang for lunch. "Oh no! I'm late and I gotta find Harry!" She started to run down the corridor.

"Wait, girl!" Filch called. He beckoned her over to the side of the wall and tugged on a sconce.

A secret passage slid open. "Go through there, it'll bring you out by the Quidditch pitch. Quicker than taking the stairs."

"Thanks! Severus will skin us if we're late!"

"Don't mention it. Now get!" he gave her a gentle shove through the passage. "I have tea at four on Saturdays, come by if you want!"

"Can I bring Harry?" she called over her shoulder.

"So long as he minds his manners, yes."

"Okay! Bye, Mr. Filch. It was nice talking to you!"

Filch snorted. "Must be goin' soft. Kids used to be afraid of me. Now I'm inviting them to tea. Ha!" Then he slid the passageway shut and returned to his cleaning.

* * * * *

When Holly at last found Harry, she was quick to show him the secret passage and tell him of her impromptu meeting with the castle steward.

"You talked with Filch?" Harry stared at her in surprise. "But the twins told me he was mean and grouchy and didn't like kids."

"Well, maybe he acts all mean because people have treated him that way for a long time. Wouldn't you be bitter and mean if you were treated like . . .like dirt, Harry?"

"Umm . . .yeah, I guess so." Harry said. "I never really thought about it before. What did you talk about?"

"Lots of things. He told me about the plague and how Professor Dumbledore lost his whole family . . .he had a daughter named Felicia and a son named Julian and they both died . . ."

"Merlin, I never knew he had kids!" Harry exclaimed. "He never said."

"Maybe he doesn't like to talk about it because it makes him sad," said his sister.

"Probably." Harry agreed, they had almost reached the dungeons now. "And he invited us to tea on Saturday. Think Dad will let us go?"

"Sure, I don't see why not."

"Wonder what potion Dad will have me brewing today?"

"Haven't a clue. But I'm doing fractions." She made a face. "I hate fractions!"

"Be glad you don't have potions then. It's all about fractions." Harry laughed.

"Merlin, then I am glad." Then she looked down at her library book. "But at least once I'm done with lessons I can read."

"Read? I'm taking a nap." Her brother rolled his eyes.

"I'd rather read than sleep." Holly said primly.

"You're so weird, Holl."

She stuck her tongue out at him. "Sleepyhead!"

"Bookworm!"

"Lazybones!"

"Encyclopedia!"

They caught several odd looks from other students making their way from Potions class, but the two ignored them and continued tossing good-natured insults at one another until they reached Snape's quarters. By that time they were laughing, which made Severus raise an eyebrow and wonder what they had been up to.

A/N: Hi, guys! Hope you all liked what happened so far. I'm having a bit of a dilemma here. Next chapter, Narcissa discovers the truth about Valina and Holly. Should she divorce Lucius and take Draco away . . .perhaps eventually end up with Severus and marry him? Or would she remain with Lucius, but be angry with him? Should Draco learn about his half-sister? Who should Sev end up with--maybe Tasha, who used to have a crush on him???? Please help me out here! So I can continue with this next chapter. Thanks!

Narcissa's Discovery

Thanks to everyone who offered me their opinions on Narcissa and Sev pairings, it helped me greatly. You'll see how it all works out eventually.

Narcissa bent to pick up the copy of the Daily Prophet she had knocked off of Lucius's desk as she searched for a partial potion recipe she had scribbled down and placed there a week ago and then forgotten. She peered at the date and only then noticed that it wasn't a current issue, but an old copy of more than a week ago. The blond woman frowned, wondering why on earth Lucius was saving old copies of the newspaper. But then she looked at the front page article and raised her eyebrows. Merlin's shorts, but Snape rescued a child in Diagon Alley. How oddly heroic. No wonder Lucius kept this. He tends to keep tabs on those who disappoint him and watch them closely. And now he regards Snape as a traitor.

She began to read the article, her own feelings towards Snape were not so harsh, at one point she had considered going out with him during school, but that was before Lucius had expressed an interest in her. She used to consider her husband a fairy tale prince, but that had been when she was young and foolish, before she realized that his suave charming air hid an obsession with dark magic and a finely honed streak of cruelty. She had always been careful not to anger him, he was dangerous when roused, like a spitting king cobra, and yet she was drawn to him like a moth to a flame.

But though she had been raised in a pureblood environment, she was not a fanatic like her sister Bella was. When she had discovered that Lucius was a part of Voldemort's inner circle, she had been frightened, for Voldemort was deadly and unpredictable, and she was afraid that if Lucius managed to displease him, he would die. She did not trust Voldemort, he was unpredictable and often his wrath fell on his followers as often as it did on enemy wizards and Muggles. She had often wished Lucius would not have involved himself with the Death Eaters, but knew better than to voice it aloud. She had wished for it even more once she had Draco, for she did not want her son to travel the dark path. Voldemort's supposed demise had caused her to feel more relief than anything else, though she was careful to display

the appropriate rage and sorrow around her husband. It was what was expected of a Death Eater's wife, and Narcissa had been raised to follow the expectations of her family.

She peered at the picture of the child in Snape's arms. Funny, but she looks a good deal like my Draco when he was that age. How strange. Lucius assured me he was the last of the Malfoys, there were only a few distaff cousins, his sister died from dragon pox when she was small.

Narcissa drew her wand and tapped it against the paper, enlarging and clarifying the photo. Yes, there definitely was a resemblance, Narcissa mused. She had the same shade of hair as Draco and Lucius and the same set of nose and jaw. Narcissa resumed reading the article, trying to see if a name was mentioned anywhere, but there was nothing save a brief mention that she was a Squib and used to live in Astoria Park, with her mother, until the latter's death.

Astoria Park was an upscale wizarding neighborhood, Narcissa knew from visiting acquaintances who had flats there. She wondered how it had come about that the girl had ended up on the streets. Had the mother spent all of their money? Perhaps that was why Lucius had saved the paper. To check a connection with this unknown child, Squib or not, family was important to purebloods, Narcissa mused.

She set the paper down and resumed her search for the potions recipe, only to come across a piece of parchment wedged in the crack at the back of the desk. Maybe the recipe had gotten caught here. Narcissa pried the parchment free and opened it.

But it was not a potions recipe. It was a letter to Lucius. Narcissa was about to fold it and set it aside, she did not read her husband's correspondences, but the signature caught her eye.

Hugs and kisses,

Your beloved,

Valina

Narcissa froze. She knew no one named Valina. Unable to stop herself, she read the entire letter, which was a note asking Lucius to come and visit soon and see her baby daughter, Holly. She is so precious and sweet, I love her to pieces and know you will too when you see her, Dragon. I think she looks like you, but you'll have to see for yourself.

Narcissa put a hand to her head. Her temples were beginning to throb and she sat down abruptly in the desk chair. She re-read the letter again and yet again before her shocked brain could comprehend everything. No. This cannot be happening. Lucius would not . . . he would not do that to me . . . I've been a good wife, I gave him an heir, I host all the meetings and parties he wishes to further his career in the Ministry . . .

But there she was, holding a letter from a woman who had obviously been Lucius's mistress, and who had apparently borne a child by him. Suddenly it all clicked. The times during their marriage, right after Draco was born and she was sick, Lucius had gone out frequently, claiming he had business meetings. That pattern had continued throughout the years. She had never really thought anything of it, her husband was a busy man with a prominent post and thus it required him to be away much of the time.

Except now she saw those little trips for what they truly were—lies and deceptions.

She recalled her mother talking to her once, when she had become engaged and was still a giddy girl. You must be constant, Narcissa, and accepting as well. A good wife understands that sometimes a man . . . well, they are different from us, and they sometimes grow restless . . . perhaps even stray from you for awhile . . . but if you don't make a fuss he will return to you a wiser and better man.

She had not understood what her mother meant then, but now she did. Now she understood all too well, she thought bitterly. She felt deeply hurt, that Lucius could betray her like that, after all she had done. She had always been faithful to him, she had never so much as looked at another man once she was married. And all the time she had been taking care of their son and hosting banquets and such for

his clients and the Minister, Lucius had been out having a good old time with . . . with Valina.

Tears burned the back of her eyes and she gritted her teeth and half crumpled the letter in her hand. She scanned the picture in the paper again, and this time she noticed just how much Holly resembled her father.

Damn you, Lucius! Damn you to the darkest hell!

She wanted to rip the picture and the letter to shreds, but she restrained herself. They were proof of his infidelity. Her mother's voice floated back into her head. Sometimes they stray . . .you must be accepting, Narcissa, they are only men . . . and men have always been creatures of impulse . . .

She bit her lip hard, furious. Is that what you did, Mother? Turned a blind eye when Daddy went out to visit his other woman? Well, not me! I'm sick and tired of playing the good little wife. I'm not a doormat, damn it! I refuse to have a double standard, not in my home!

Narcissa wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. Her mother had been wrong. She could not just ignore this. She was not at fault here, she had always done her best to be considerate and supportive, her only flaw had been her inability to provide Lucius with more than one child. The Black women had always had problems carrying children to term and were lucky to have more than one child. Having Draco had almost finished her, after that the Healer had said she was at risk and should not have any more children.

Is that why you went and found her, Luc? Because I was used goods and your perfect Malfoy self could not bear it? Did you love her? Did you think of her at night when you slept next to me? Was she pretty? Did she make your heart race, damn you?

She stuffed the letter and the paper in her pocket and decided to satisfy her curiosity about Valina once and for all. Angry as she was, she couldn't help wondering what the other witch had been like. Given the headline in the paper, she was certain that everyone in that neighborhood would know where Valina had lived and perhaps some

of them would be willing to talk about her. A little girl. You could have had a little girl with me, Luc, if only . . . Stop it, Cissy. What's done is done. But I will never forgive him for carrying on like that under my nose. All those years . . . She sniffed and wiped at her eyes, casting a quick Glamour charm to hide the fact that she had been crying.

She had a good two hours before Lucius came home from work and Draco from his tutor. Plenty of time to unearth some secrets.

* * * * *

Lucius had just arrived home from the Ministry and had hung his cloak up on the cloak rack and was about to summon Dobby to get him a shot of firewhiskey when Narcissa entered the manor. Startled, Lucius looked up and saw that Narcissa looked mad enough to cast the Cruciatus on him. Puzzled, he inquired, "Cissy, where were you?"

"Finding out some information," she said shortly. "We need to talk, Lucius."

"Can it wait? I just got home."

She shook her head. "No, it can't."

He rolled his eyes. "What could possibly be so important that it can't wait until I've had a drink and something to eat?" Seeing the light of battle darken her eyes, he waved her across the long black and white marble tiled floor to his study.

She strode into the wood paneled room and remained waiting until Lucius came in. He promptly seated himself in his comfortable leather chair and put his feet up casually on his desk while eyeing Narcissa in frank amusement. "Dobby!" He snapped his fingers.

The house elf appeared immediately. "Yes, Master?"

"Bring me a shot of firewhiskey and some of those crab canapés."

"Yes, Master Lucius. Right away, sir." Dobby bowed, practically groveling, and then vanished.

Three minutes later, a plate and a glass popped up on the desk. Lucius flicked back the firewhiskey with lazy precision, then set the glass down. "Now, Cissy, what's got your skirt in a knot? Your little women's club cancel the annual spring party or whatever?"

Narcissa bristled inwardly at his condescending tone. She removed the paper and the letter from the pocket of her midnight blue robes and slapped them pointedly down on the desk. "Recognize these?" she demanded. "This is what has me spitting mad, Lucius Daine Malfoy."

Lucius looked at the newspaper clipping and the letter and went pale as a dead flobberworm. "Where did . . .how . . .?" he sputtered, at a loss for words.

"I found both of them on your desk. Actually, the letter was stuck in a crack at the back of the desk."

"What were you searching for, Cissy?" he immediately recovered, taking an aggressive tone. "You know I hate you going through my papers."

"I was looking for the potions recipe I'd left there. You were examining it last night. And instead I found those." Her fingernail stabbed the papers angrily. "How long have you had this mistress, Luc? Did you engage her right after Draco was born, or did you wait a few weeks out of courtesy?"

Lucius was swearing a blue streak silently, furious at his oversight. He should have made sure all of Valina's letters were cinders and that particular copy of the Prophet burnt to ash as well. But after his humiliation at Snape's house, he had forgotten he still had a copy of the Prophet, and somehow that single letter—the one announcing Holly's birth ironically—had escaped his notice. The sins of the past shall come back to haunt you threefold. The old saying drifted into his head, but he brushed it off and composed his face into something resembling neutrality.

"It was a moment's indiscretion, Cissy. And it's over. Don't get yourself all worked up over nothing, darling."

"Nothing! This is not nothing, Lucius! Merlin's blasted balls, but you had a child with this woman—Valina Sinclair. You bloody bounder, you cheated on me!" she exploded, shaking with the force of her rage and hurt. "Was she younger than me? Was that how you rationalized your behavior?"

Lucius's own temper began to ignite, for he did not like the tone his wife was taking with him, nor the slight feeling of guilt her words stirred in his cold heart. "I need explain nothing to you, Narcissa. Suffice to say that I needed a woman and she was available and willing when you were not. As I said before, she was a fling."

"That's not what this says," Narcissa picked up the letter and thrust it under his nose. "I love you now more than ever, Dragon. You have given me a gift beyond price and now we are truly one." That doesn't sound like a momentary fling to me, Luc! She really loved you, damn it!"

"So what if she did? She was a romantic fool, like most women. She knew it could come to naught, I made that perfectly clear to her the first time I escorted her home. But she refused to accept that, and when . . .the baby was born . . .she became even more attached to me."

"Because you had given her no reason not to be!" Narcissa snapped. "You brought her presents and flowers and jewelry, her and her little girl both! I know, I asked her neighbors and they told me how you used to visit there three times a month sometimes and you always brought something with you. And it went on for years—years! I wouldn't consider that a brief affair, Malfoy!"

Lucius brought his hand down on the desk top with a sharp smack. "And I told you—it is over, Narcissa. So what does it matter now?"

"She might be dead, but her daughter isn't! What about her, Luc?"

He waved his hand in dismissal. "She is a Squib. Useless and of no importance to me."

Narcissa was speechless for a moment. Holy Merlin, I knew he was prejudiced against those who bore almost no magic and Muggles especially, but this . . .this is his own flesh and blood we're talking about! How can he just abandon his own daughter? Not that I want here here, but still . . .His callus attitude shocked her and she cried, "You would treat your own daughter that way? How could you?"

Lucius's eyes narrowed. "Why would you care, Cissy? She is not your concern. Or mine anymore."

"She is your daughter! Don't you care enough to see that she is looked after?"

Lucius shrugged. "That was her mother's concern, not mine."

"But she's dead."

"I know. Dead these four weeks, in an unfortunate potions accident."

Something about the way he said that made Narcissa's blood run cold. And suddenly she knew that Valina Sinclair's death had been no accident. "It wasn't." The slender witch whispered, almost to herself. "You did it."

"Did what? Rid myself of an inconvenience?" drawled her husband. "Yes, I arranged for the wrong ingredients to be brought down to her workstation, mislabeled. Don't tell me you feel sad that she is dead? The rival for my affections?"

"I . . .I . . ." Narcissa stammered. Earlier today she would have said she would never weep for the woman who had stolen away her husband, that she had deserved to die. But that was before she had gone searching for answers and discovered that Valina Sinclair had been a halfway decent woman, according to those she had spoken to. None of them had said anything derogatory about her, save that she had fallen in with a bounder, a man who would never love her. "I

would not wish that death on anyone,” she managed at last. “Why did you kill her?”

“She refused to give up her daughter. And she lied to me, hiding the fact that girl was a Squib from me. Treacherous bitch! Expecting me to continue supporting her and her brat, when the child was a Squib! I had hoped, with her lines and mine . . .”

“You sound like someone looking to breed a horse,” Narcissi said disgustedly. “Was that why you went to her? Because I could have no more children and was flawed?”

“I never said that,” he began, trying to placate her.

“You didn’t need to. I know you too well, Luc. If something is broken or imperfect you do what Malfoys always do—you get rid of it. I couldn’t have any more children, so you found a mistress. When she bore you a Squib you decided to get rid of her and her daughter too! What’s next? If Draco disappoints you, will you disown him and leave him in the snow to die?”

Lucius scowled. “Oh, quit being so dramatic, Cissy. I would never disown Draco, not unless he did something unforgivable . . .like marrying a Muggle or something. You’re making a mountain out of a molehill.”

“I think not. At first, I thought you had fallen in love with her, and while it hurt, I suppose I might have eventually forgiven you it. I should have known better. You love only two things, yourself and your precious Malfoy name. Three, because I think you love Draco. Merlin only knows if you loved me once. But I would have been content, Luc, because I loved you and that was enough. I—”

“Narcissa, enough! I refuse to discuss this further!” he thundered, a warning gleam in his eye.

“I don’t give a damn what you want, Lucius! Your little affair just ruined your marriage, you selfish self-serving prig!” shouted Narcissa, incensed that he thought she would take this lying down.

“Ruined our marriage?” he repeated incredulously. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that I’m divorcing you.”

“Divorcing me?” he burst out laughing. “Oh, Cissy, how many champagne cocktails did you have? Divorce? Over this? Please, talk sense, for Merlin’s sake! I’ve done nothing to insult your honor, dear wife. It’s perfectly acceptable for a man of my class to have a mistress. Your father had one, and did your mother divorce him?”

“I am NOT my mother!” shrieked Narcissa. “I refuse to live her life, you bloody hypocrite! I was faithful to you always and this was how you repaid me—by having an affair and a child with another woman! And if you think I’m going to just stand here and say—oh, that’s nice dear, now let’s go have dinner—think again, Mr. Malfoy!” To her horror, tears began to roll down her cheeks. She quickly dashed them away.

“Cissy, you wouldn’t dare divorce me. The scandal would destroy you.”

“I don’t give a bloody damn.”

“You do. And think about Draco. You wouldn’t want him to start Hogwarts with that hanging over him, now would you?”

“Better that than living in a house with two people who despise each other,” Narcissa flared. “And you’d have more scandal to live down than I would!”

Lucius stood up abruptly. “Narcissa, don’t push me.” His face was like granite.

Once she would have backed down. But she was too angry and for once she stood her ground. “Or what? You’ll arrange for me to have an accident too? Be careful, Lucius. Two dead woman and people will talk, maybe even investigate. Wouldn’t want the Malfoy name dragged through the muck, now would you?”

“Don’t threaten me, little witch.” He loomed over her, but she was not cowed. He reached for her and made as if to kiss her, but she drew away.

Then she slapped him hard across the face.

“Bastard! Do you think you can buy me off with that, you rotten pig? What do you think I am?”

“A foolish hysterical idiot, like most of your sex. If you walk away, Narcissa, you won’t ever see Draco again.”

“An empty threat, Lucius! I’m his mother, and they usually grant custody to mothers. You can expect a visit from my solicitor,” she declared haughtily, then she snatched the papers off the desk, spun on her heel, and walked out.

She almost ran over Draco, who had come home from his tutor and had been listening in horrified astonishment to his parents’ quarrel. “Draco!”

“Mother? What’s going on? Where are you going?”

“Away for awhile. I promise I’ll explain everything later.” She said quickly, hugging him briefly. When she drew away, he caught sight of the picture of Snape, Harry, and Holly.

“Who’s that girl?”

“Your half-sister, Holly.”

Draco goggled at her. He hadn’t been quite sure he’d heard correctly, but his mother’s words confirmed the astonishing terrible truth.

“I’ll write you as soon as I can. Don’t do anything to cross your father, dragonling. Act like you know nothing. I’ll come for you soon, promise. Love you.” Then she kissed him on the cheek and Apparated before he could say anything else.

Draco stood there in the middle of the foyer, his mind spinning round and round. Surely this was some bizarre nightmare, he had fallen asleep again over his penmanship exercises and soon his tutor would awaken him with a sharp shake. But his mother's words echoed in his head . . .Your half-sister . . .You'll arrange for me to have an accident too . . . I was faithful to you always and this was how you repaid me—by having an affair and a child with another woman! Before he could ponder any further on the conversation he had overheard, the door to the study opened and Lucius came out.

“Draco, when did you get home?” he inquired calmly.

“Just now, Father. Why?”

“No reason.”

“Where's Mother?” Draco asked casually, wanting to see how his father would react.

Lucius did not twitch an eyebrow, saying quietly, “She has gone away for awhile. To her sister's. Your Aunt Andromeda.”

“When? Today? How long will she be gone?” Slick, Father. Very smooth. I might have bought it, if I didn't overhear what I did. Draco thought angrily.

“A month or so. She needed a little vacation, son. But I think you and I can manage ourselves just fine. Right?” He clapped his son on the back and gave him a small smile. Draco nodded quickly. “Now, I believe you have homework, yes? Go upstairs and work on it. Dobby will call you for dinner in an hour and a half. I have some business to settle.”

“Yes, Father,” Draco said obediently, and made as if to go upstairs.

Lucius returned to his study, and Draco quickly went and put an ear to the door. Lucius's words had unsettled him deeply.

Inside the study, Lucius was pacing and cursing. “Damn that Squib girl to hell! Had I known the trouble she would cause, I would have

drowned her at birth. I must get rid of her, then Narcissa will return to me." He paused, then added, "And I shall Oblivate Narcissa, so this subject will never come up again."

Draco backed away, his gray eyes wide. He had always known his father was not a man to cross, he had learned early to never throw tantrums around him, or else receive a swift whipping, and he had always feared more than loved the elder wizard. But he had never understood just how ruthless and cruel the man was until now.

He crept away and up to his room, shaking slightly and wishing he could have left with his mother. His world had been turned upside down and he did not know what to think or what to do. Except for one thing. He quickly pulled out a clean piece of parchment and began to write.

After five minutes, he whistled for his sleek eagle owl, Bolt.

The big gray owl flew over and perched upon his shoulder, chirruping eagerly. "Here, boy. Deliver this to Mother, okay?" He ruffled Bolt's feathers gently. He tied the note upon the owl's leg and opened the window.

The owl flew off into the sunset and Draco shut the window and then lay down on his bed, trying to make sense of the disaster that had occurred.

Okay, so how did you like the fight between the Malfoys? And Narcissa's reaction to Holly? You'll see more of Narcissa and Draco towards the end of this fic. Please review and let me know how I'm doing! Thanks! I also have a new fic posted called Harry Potter Dogsitter, featuring a five year old Harry and Master Healer Snape plus a wild puppy that is going to drive Sev to drink, LOL!

An Unexpected Turn of Events

It had been a week since Holly and Harry had arrived at Hogwarts and since then they had settled in nicely with the staff (excepting Throckmorton) and most of the students as well. Harry knew most of the older Slytherins and some of the Gryffindors, Ravenclaws, and a few Hufflepuffs from his years spent at the school before this, and all of them were careful to treat the newest addition to the Snape family with respect.

Two or three of the fifth year Slytherin girls thought Holly was adorable and invited her up to their dorm one afternoon and taught her a few things about hairstyles and makeup. She returned to Severus for her lessons later that same day with her hair in a complicated French twist, wearing shimmery pink lip gloss, a touch of blush, and some lavender eyeshadow.

Severus's jaw nearly hit the floor. "Merlin have mercy! Are you wearing make-up, Miss Sinclair?"

Holly, who had been rather proud of her new look, immediately cringed at his disapproving tone and whispered, "Yes, sir. I . . . I thought it'd be okay . . . Barbara and Mindy said it wasn't a lot . . ."

Severus felt a vein in his temple start to throb. Bloody hell, Snape! I should have anticipated this, she's a girl, they all go through this . . . but I thought I'd have a few years yet, Merlin help me! Take a breath, Severus, and remember, she's only nine . . . "Holly," he began, trying to keep his voice calm yet with a hint of sternness.

But even that mild tone was too much for the girl's nerves. "I'm sorry, sir! I'll wash it off! Please don't be mad at me!" she wailed, bursting into noisy sobs. She turned to run away from him.

Severus caught her before she could leave, astonished that she would so fear his disapproval that she was bawling before he'd even begun scolding her. "Holly, wait. I'm not angry with you so much as . . . surprised," he began awkwardly, patting her lightly on the back. Sev, you fumblefooted idiot! You know she's still an emotional wreck, Susan warned you you'd have to go gently with her, and now look

what you've done. The Mind Healer had explained to him that as her new guardian, Holly held him in high regard, so much so that she was terrified of disappointing him, since disappointing the only other male authority figure in her life had led to tragedy.

The small girl was sobbing into his robe, promising to be good. Severus drew in a deep breath and put an arm about her and said softly, "Here now, child, no need to carry on like this. Anyone would think I'd beaten the blazes out of you. Shhh . . . stop crying and look at me."

"Don't send me away . . .don't . . ."

"Send you away? Holly Amanda Sinclair, what have I told you about that?" he queried, tipping her chin up so she was looking into his face.

Holly sniffled, mastering herself enough to get out, "You said . . .that you wouldn't."

"I meant it. Trust me on that, little one. I will never send you away, no matter how angry I am or how much you misbehave."

"Promise?"

"Promise. Now, come here, we need to have a little talk about this," Severus urged, and he picked her up and brought her over to the couch and sat down with her. He swiftly conjured another handkerchief and gently wiped Holly's face, scrubbing away the tears and some of the make-up as well. "Blow." He held the handkerchief to her nose. "Good. All right, first I want you to understand that I am not angry with you."

"You're not? But . . .you looked like you were."

Severus sighed. "Sometimes . . .I may look angry when I'm not actually feeling that way, Holly. I am more surprised at this than angry. You are a bit young to . . uh . . .start wearing cosmetics."

"Mindy said that I looked cute and I wanted to be like them, sir. They're pretty and . . . I wish I was older so then I wouldn't be such a . . . little nuisance."

"Holly, when have I ever said that?"

"Never, but . . ." she squirmed a little, glancing away, but Severus put a hand under her chin, and made her look at him. "I know it's a pain . . . having me living with you and Harry."

"Is that what you think?" Severus repeated in astonishment. "Holly, having you here with me is not a nuisance or a burden. I enjoy having you here, you are intelligent and resourceful and a good influence on Harry, who loves having you as his sister. And I love having a daughter, though it does take a bit of getting used to," he admitted wryly. "Forgive me if I frightened you, I thought Harry would have told you that . . . sometimes I may storm and shout and I don't really mean it. I get that from my father, you see . . ."

"Oh. Was he nice, like you?"

Severus coughed. "Like me? Tobias Snape? Merlin forbend! No, Holly, my father was very much like your father, I'm afraid. He did not like the fact that I could do magic and we did not get along at all."

"Did he kick you out in the street too?"

"No, but only because my mother prevented it. And that is not what I want to discuss with you, stop getting me sidetracked . . ." he paused, collected himself, and then went on. "As I said before, you belong with me, and nothing you do will change that. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Now, about the cosmetics . . . I didn't expect to be having this particular talk until you were twelve, at least, however . . . I think you should wait until you're thirteen before wearing eye makeup or blush, a bit of lip gloss is fine, as long as it's subtle, not screaming green or vampire blood red, or heaven forbid . . . electric blue . . ." here the Potions Master shuddered. "You wouldn't believe the things teenage

girls are wearing these days . . ." Holly smothered a giggle at his look of utter disgust. "You have a very pretty face and you don't need make-up to look sophisticated or older. You're a little girl and you don't need to grow up any faster, Holly. You ought to enjoy being a child . . .there's no need to rush, the years come too quickly as it is." He gently removed the hair clip in her hair and let the long golden brown tresses come tumbling down. He carded a hand through her hair, undoing the braid until Holly's hair was loose and flowing. "There! Much better. Now, I believe we were going to cover some history today, about Elizabeth the First, who had as tumultuous a childhood as you did, little one."

"Her father cut off her mother's head," Holly recalled and shivered. "And he disowned her too, once. And she had an older sister who tried to kill her, right?"

"She did indeed, young Elizabeth was lucky to make it past sixteen, given the enemies she had. But she persevered and she never gave up and look at what she became-queen of all England, and one of the best monarchs Britain ever had. You would do well to use her as an example of what you can do if you set your mind to it. Be all that you can be, Holly, and you will make me very proud."

"But Severus, how can I be anything good when I'm a Squib and all anyone will hire me for is to scrub floors?" she pointed out wistfully.

And not for the first time, Severus Snape cursed the evil prejudice that permeated the wizarding world. "Holly, you are as good as any wizard alive, better than some, in fact, and I intend to see you go to the best university in Britain, and you do not have to be employed in the wizarding world, you can work among Muggles and be a great success and to the bloody blue blazes with what wizards might think. You have too much talent to let it go to waste cleaning floors."

"But Mr. Filch cleans floors and he's smart too."

"I know, but Mr. Filch never had the chance to do anything more, it's a shame, since he has one of the best analytical minds I know, but that will not be the case for you, Holly. I will make certain you have

the opportunity he never did and you take it and make the best of it, y'hear?" he pretended to frown sternly at her, and winked.

"Yes, sir. I mean, Severus."

"That's my girl. Now, let's get out your history book and turn to page three-hundred and ninety-five. We'll finish that chapter and then you've a session with Healer Sue, where you can complain to her about what an ogre I've been lately."

"I'd never do that, Severus!"

"No? Why not? Over half my students complain about me, that I'm too strict and nasty."

"They don't know what real nasty is." Holly said wisely. "My father is real nasty. You're just . . .Severus. And I'm glad you're my teacher." All at once she threw her arms about him and hugged him. He gave her a gentle squeeze, then set her on her feet and she scurried off to get her text.

Merlin, one minute she's crying the next she's all smiles. And she hasn't even reached puberty yet. I'd better stock up on my Calming Draughts and Drafts of Peace now, while I still have time. I think I'm going to need them. Either that or several cases of firewhiskey. Perhaps some counseling with Sue as well, she'd better not retire before Holly graduates. Severus rubbed his temples, then rose and walked into the kitchen, summoning a notebook and a quill and ink, as well as a portable chalkboard.

He related the incident to Susan before she began her session with Holly, shaking his head in disgust at himself. "I keep forgetting I can't growl and snap at her like I do my students or Harry on occasion, that she thinks it means I hate her and I nearly undid all the good you managed to do, Sue."

But Healer Keegan shook her head at his words. "Sev, don't beat yourself up over this, it happens, we all make mistakes. Yes, you have to moderate your tone with her, but don't coddle her either. She won't keel over and die if you scold her or punish her, that's part of

growing up and she needs to learn that your anger isn't going to have drastic consequences for her like Lucius' did. You need to show her that your anger when she misbehaves has normal consequences-like grounding or whatever, and she can trust you to be fair and consistent. That's what she needs, Sev, love and support and also loving discipline. Something which I know you can provide, old friend, since you've done a great job with Harry."

Severus coughed, embarrassed. "I've made plenty of mistakes with him too."

"So? That comes with the territory. There's no real blueprint for being a parent, Severus. All you can do is try your best and try not to make the same mistakes your parents did and hope for Merlin's blessing."

"I suppose . . .but this is a girl I'm dealing with here and I have almost no experience in that department . . ."

She chuckled at the expression of dread on his face. "Severus, call me if you need to. I think this pregnancy will be a good one, at least it feels that way, and I should be able to field any questions you might have about why she's acting the way she does. Or, you could start dating again." The Healer offered with an impish grin.

"Sue, don't start that again. That's the last thing I need right now." He glanced up as the clock on his mantle began chiming the half-hour. "Two-thirty. Where is Harry? He's late again for his lesson." The professor frowned angrily. "That's going to stop. Just because I don't have a formal class with him doesn't mean he can waltz in here whenever he feels like it . . ." He trailed off as the door to his quarters opened and Harry walked in, accompanied by Silver.

"What happened?" cried Severus upon catching sight of his son, who looked like he'd been walloped to the tenth degree.

Harry was limping, his hair was mussed, he had a smear of dirt across his cheek and more on his shirt, the knee was ripped out of his jeans, showing a scrape beneath, and the boy's glasses were askew on his nose, which looked like it had been bleeding recently.

"Uh . . .this owl crashed into me while I was flying and knocked me off my broom," replied Harry, wincing. "But I'm okay, Dad. Just bruised a little," he added quickly, seeing Severus draw his wand. "The owl was hurt worse than I am."

"I'll be the judge of that. Come here," Severus beckoned to his son.

Harry groaned, he hated to be fussed over. "Dad, I'm fine."

"Harry," Severus said, a warning note in his voice.

"I'll be going on to my session with Holly," Susan announced, then bent and whispered in Severus's ear, "He's more embarrassed than badly injured, Sev. You know what boys are like at his age."

Severus nodded, he knew all too well about injured pride, but he still needed to check his son over. Harry reluctantly came to stand before him, holding a slightly crumpled letter in his hand.

"Here, Dad. The owl was trying to deliver this to you when he flew into me. Hagrid said he'd take care of the owl and I should bring this to you right away."

Severus took the letter, gave it a cursory glance and set it down on an end table. "I'll read it later. First, let me see what you've done to yourself, Little Mischief. Where does it hurt?"

"It doesn't, really," Harry said swiftly, and Severus knew he was lying.

Silver barked sharply and Severus glanced over to see the big wolf shake his head in disagreement. He turned back to his son. "Silver disagrees with that, Harry."

"How would he know? He's a wolf."

"He wasn't always and when he was younger he had more than a few falls from a broom," Severus countered. "Now, are you going to tell me where you're hurt, or must I vanish your clothing and call Madam Pomfrey?"

"No! I don't need to go to the Hospital Wing!" Harry yelled. He went scarlet, then muttered, "I hurt my knees, and . . .my shoulder . . .and my bum . . .that's the worst . . ."

"Silver?" Severus looked questioningly at the wolf.

Silver whuffed and nodded.

"Thanks a lot!" Harry grumbled, shooting an annoyed glare at Remus.

"Come with me, son. You're probably going to need a hot bath with some of my mineral salts and some bruise salve and that scrape needs cleaning out too." Severus assisted Harry into the bathroom, then told him to undress. While his son did that, he ran a bath and removed healing potions from a cabinet built into the wall.

Severus cleaned the scrapes on Harry's knees with soap and water and then applied some antibacterial paste to seal it and prevent infections. His son remained still, submitting without a fuss.

"Turn around." Severus ordered.

He shook his head when he saw Harry's bruised bottom, and gently examined his son's tailbone and inner thighs, which were chafed as well. Harry yelled, and Severus said, "You've bruised your tailbone, no wonder you were limping. Well, the bath will help, and I'll cast a Cushioning Charm on your chair before lessons and dinner. The salve should help the rest."

He carefully felt over his son's shoulder, relieved to note that it was not sprained or dislocated, just bruised. "All right, get into the tub and soak for twenty minutes."

Harry stuck a toe in and yelled. "Ouch! It's too hot! I'm not a lobster."

"The heat will help you relax those muscles, son. You'll get used to it." Severus said, then lifted his son into the bath before Harry could protest any further.

He ignored Harry's yelps, holding the boy in the water until gradually Harry adjusted to the temperature and quit fighting. "Good. Lie back and relax. You can get out when the glass runs out of sand," he told his son, waving his wand.

An hourglass popped up on the counter. "Twenty minutes. I'll be back to apply the salve," Severus said, then left.

* * * * *

After the bath and the salve, which numbed the pain in his rear considerably, Harry felt much better, though he would never admit it. "Are you going to open the letter, Dad?" was the first thing out of his mouth once he had emerged from the bathroom. "I wonder what was so important that the owl was willing to fly injured in order to deliver it?"

"You'll just have to wait to find out," Severus told him firmly. "You were late to my lesson and now we have an extra half-an-hour to make up. Take out your Charms text and we'll work on Cushioning Charms today."

"Aww, Merlin!" Harry groaned, he was dying to know what was in the letter. "Can't we do that after we read the letter, Dad?"

"Lessons first, young man." Severus ordered. "Open your book and take out your practice wand."

Since Harry hadn't gone to get his real wand yet, he was allowed to use a practice wand, which was a wand borrowed from the school stores from a wizard who had died and donated it to the school. He grumbled under his breath about his father the slavedriver and sulked, dawdling while taking his charms text out of his bag and his wand from its case.

Snape ground his back teeth at his son's deliberate procrastination. "Harry James Snape, if you don't quit taking your sweet time and sulking like a spoiled baby, you won't ever find out what's in the letter, because you'll be grounded to your room for the rest of the evening."

"I'm not!" he argued.

"Mind that tone, young man. Turn to page one-hundred and twelve."

Harry obeyed sullenly. "Okay, now what?"

"Watch," Severus said, and swished and tapped his wand down on the chair Harry was about to sit on and speaking the word to the charm at the same time.

A blue bubble shot out of his wand and settled upon the chair. "There! Sit."

Harry sat gingerly, expecting it to hurt, but instead it was as if a cloud cradled his abused backside, and he managed a small smile of relief. "It works great."

Severus then banished the charm once Harry had stood up, then said, "Your turn, Mr. Snape. Let's see how well you were paying attention."

Harry bit his lip in concentration. It was then that he wished he was like Holly, who only needed to see or read something once and she remembered it. He swished his wand and tapped it, repeating the charm.

But the bubble that came out of it was too small to cushion the chair.

"You need to put more conviction behind your wand movements and your tone, Harry. Concentrate hard and then cast the spell."

Harry huffed, then attempted the spell again.

Finally, on the fifth try, he cast it successfully. "I did it!"

"Very good. Now sit down, and we'll have a little quiz." Severus told him, hiding a smile at his son's dismay.

"A quiz? But I just learned how to cast this!" cried Harry in alarm.

"The quiz will cover the Summoning Charm and the Levitation Charm, you learned previously," said the professor, handing him a quill, ink, and a piece of parchment.

Harry moaned and took the quill. Merlin, but how come he had to get stuck with a quiz-loving professor for a father? This was the second quiz Severus had given him since they'd started lessons a week and a half ago. Were other teachers like this, or was it just Severus?

But at last he was finished with the ten questions and Severus made him recast the Cushioning Charm again before saying lessons were over.

Harry stood up and stretched, despite the charm, he still felt stiff and slightly sore.

"Go get the letter," Severus told him before Harry could voice his wish.

Harry raced into the den and picked up the envelope.

He waited with bated breath while Severus carefully opened it, there was no return address on the outside.

Severus unfolded the parchment and read silently.

Dear Severus,

This should not surprise you, but I have discovered Lucius's infidelity and the fact that he had a child with another woman, a former classmate of ours named Valina Sinclair. When I confronted him, I discovered that he wished to pretend it never happened and he refused to take responsibility for what he had done. Since his daughter is a Squib, he wants nothing to do with her, though he did hint that her mother's death was no accident.

Severus, he frightens me, he will do anything to keep his reputation clean of scandal, and I have decided to divorce him. I am currently staying in Hogsmeade, and I am meeting with my solicitor to see what can be done about me getting custody of Draco. I do not want

him to stay with Lucius, there is too much bad influence there, and I do not want my son walking the dark road like his father.

I am writing you this to warn you as well to watch over your children, especially the little girl, Holly. Draco told me he heard Lucius talking to himself about trying to get rid of her and Oblivate me when he found me, and I know he would not hesitate to do so. You know him, Severus, you know what a ruthless cold heart he has. He belongs to his dark master body and soul and I cannot live with that any longer.

I want to know if you could help me get Draco away from there, preferably before I serve Lucius with the divorce and custody papers? I promised my son I would return for him and I cannot break that promise. But Lucius will be watching for me, and I am not skilled in avoiding spell traps like you are. Please help me, Severus, I have not been able to sleep for worry and even now I feel as if eyes are upon me.

I hope this letter reaches you, there is something odd in the air tonight, a presence of darkness . . .

Once Draco is with me, perhaps you could suggest a safe place for us to hide, for Lucius will be hunting us in revenge. Watch your back and please send a reply as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

Narcissa Ariadne Black, formerly Malfoy

Severus muttered several swear words before straightening and looking at his curious son. "Well, Harry, it would seem we are about to have some new guests at Hogwarts soon."

"Who?"

"They are Narcissa and Draco Malfoy, the former wife of Lucius Malfoy and Holly's half-brother."

"When are they coming?"

"That remains to be seen. I must meet with Narcissa in Hogsmeade and inform the Headmaster as well. We must strengthen the wards about the castle."

"Why, Dad?"

"Because once Lucius discovers where his wife and son are, he will stop at nothing to claim them or destroy them. And Holly as well."

"But they're his family, why would he want to hurt them? That's crazy."

"That is Lucius for you." Severus said grimly. "From now on, you are to go nowhere on the grounds unless accompanied by an adult or Silver. And you must tell me before you leave the castle or my quarters where you are going. Lucius might try and hurt you to get back at me and I want to make sure you are safe. Am I understood?"

"Yes, Dad."

"Do not disobey me, young man. This is not a joke, Lucius Malfoy is a dangerous wizard and he will not hesitate to hurt a child. So think before you act and follow my rules or else you could end up hostage to a warlock who knows no mercy." Severus stressed, looking directly into his son's eyes as he spoke.

Harry gulped. After what he had done to Holly, he knew Severus was not kidding about Lucius Malfoy. He shivered and said quickly, "I'll behave, Dad. I'm not stupid."

"Good. Wear your amulet at all times." Severus ruffled his son's hair. "Now, I need to speak with Professor Dumbledore. I should be back within half an hour and then we can head down to the Hall for supper."

"When are you going to tell Holly, Dad?"

"After supper. No sense in ruining her dinner." Severus said, not looking forward to that conversation at all. He peered at Harry, who looked alarmed, his emerald eyes wide with anxiety. He patted Harry

on the shoulder reassuringly. "Don't worry, son. You're safe here, I'll make certain of it. But it never hurts to be careful."

"Right. Uh, Dad, if they do come here, will they be moving in here too?"

Severus shook his head. "No. This is not a hotel. They will be given guest rooms in the castle, I would imagine. It will be awkward enough for Holly meeting her half-brother and stepmother for the first time without making them live together. But we'll cross that bridge when we come to it. Go and take a nap, you look tired. I'll wake you in time for supper."

Then Severus Flooded away to Dumbledore's office, leaving Harry to ponder this unexpected turn of events for as long as he could keep his eyes open, which was a total of three minutes. Then he yawned and curled up on his stomach on the couch, falling asleep moments later, worn out from the accident, the lesson, and the surprising news.

How did you like Sev's discussions with Holly and Harry? And Narcissa's letter?

Funny, but I was originally going to have this be just a short story, but now the characters have kidnapped me and are holding me hostage and demanding I rethink my plans for this one.

So . . .who wants this to be a full-length novel?

Please let me know, or else they will keep me here forever, shackled to my laptop, writing awful sappy love poems and stuff.

Cruel Joke

After supper, Severus called Holly and Harry into the living area and had them sit on the couch. Harry flopped down bonelessly next to his father, then winced, for his bottom was still sore. Holly sat down with a wary look on her face, wondering if she had done anything to get in trouble for, but couldn't figure out what it was.

Severus remained silent for a moment, unsure of how best to proceed. At last he decided to just say it straight out and cleared his throat. "I have just received a letter from a former schoolmate of mine, Narcissa. And it concerns you, Holly." He looked directly at the small girl, who was sitting bolt upright on the couch with her hands folded, her sapphire eyes pensive, she was wearing a soft gray skirt and a Slytherin pullover one of his students had given her.

"Me?" she repeated, puzzled.

"Yes, you see . . . Narcissa is the wife of Lucius Malfoy. He was married to her before he . . . ah . . . met your mother. They have a son, Draco, he is Harry's age. Narcissa wrote me to say that she had just learned about you and your mother, Holly, and to tell me that she is leaving her husband."

Holly sat stunned for a long moment. Then she said, very softly, "Is she leaving him 'cause of me, Severus?"

"No. She's leaving him because she does not trust him and she is frightened. She is afraid he will hurt her and her son, since she is aware of how he treated you and your mother. And she has asked me to help her take Draco away from his father, legally and physically."

"Is Draco a wizard?"

"Yes."

"Oh." Holly's hands twisted in her lap. "Then I guess my father likes him better. I can't believe I have another brother. And a . . . stepmother, I guess." She bit her lip. "I think now I know why he

didn't care so much about me, if he already had a wife and a kid. What did he need me for? He already had a wizard kid to love, right?"

"Holly, Lucius didn't care about you because he is a fool and wouldn't know love if it came and kicked him in the backside. I do not think he loves his son either, only the fact that Draco has magic and is the heir he needed to inherit his name and his property and Galleons. And that is what Narcissa believes also, which is why she has left and come to me asking for help."

"Are you gonna help her, Dad?" asked Harry.

"Yes. She and Draco deserve to be free of Lucius's dark shadow."

"That's good, I guess." Holly remarked. Then she said diffidently, "But Severus, does that mean I have to live with them now?"

"No, little one. Draco may be your blood relative, but that does not mean Narcissa assumes responsibility for you. As I said before, you are my daughter and you belong in this family. Unless . . .you wish to live with Narcissa and Draco?" Severus queried gently.

Holly shook her head. "No, I want to stay here with you. You saved me from the snow and everything and I like having you for my . . .dad and not Lucius. And Harry for my big brother. You were what I Saw in the fire that night, not them. I'd like to meet my . . .other brother though. D'you think he'll like me?"

"Why wouldn't he?" Harry demanded.

Holly gave him a look that said he was being dense. "You know why not, Harry. 'Cause I'm a Squib."

"Oh. Well, he will if he knows what's good for him. If he starts anything with you I'll knock him into next week." Harry said, a fierce protectiveness shining in his green eyes.

"Harry James Snape, have you learned nothing from being grounded for fighting previously?" demanded his father, frowning down at his son.

"I know, Dad, but this is different." Harry argued. "If I'm Holly's big brother and so is Draco, then that makes him my brother too, sort of. And if he starts picking on her, I've a right to teach him a lesson, since he's family."

Severus just stared at him. "Where on earth do you come up with such logic?" he muttered, half to himself, putting a hand to his forehead. "Harry, if Draco needs a lesson in manners, either I or Narcissa will teach him, not you. That is our responsibility. Am I understood?"

"Yeah, but if he starts anything-"

"Harry!" Severus rebuked sharply.

"Okay, okay. Fine, Dad. If he starts talking trash about Holly, I'll get you and you can kick his arse. 'Cause nobody talks that way about my sister, even if he's her real brother or whatever."

"You're my real brother too, Harry." Holly put in loyally.

Severus groaned and shook his head. "What am I going to do with you two?"

"Uh . . .be nice and don't ground me for a month if I happen to slip and punch Draco in the nose?" Harry teased.

"Nice try, boy." Severus mock-growled. "You'd better behave, Mr. Snape. I want you to all try and get along, not be at each other's throats like two jealous dogs."

"We will, long as he's nice to Holly," Harry insisted stubbornly.

Severus fixed him with an uncompromising glare. "Behave, Harry. That is not open for negotiation. I'm proud that you want to protect and defend your sister, but you can't go around letting your fists do your talking. Self-control, remember? It's one of the most important lessons a wizard needs to learn. You will always find people who are prejudiced, who think that just because a person is different, they are

beneath them, but you cannot pound your beliefs into their heads, Harry. Even if you're right and they're wrong. It won't work. Trust me on that."

"How do you know? You try it once?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I did." Severus admitted wryly, recalling the many scraps of his youth with the Marauders, who were forever on about a half-blood Slytherin daring to try and go out with a Gryffindor witch. "And all it got me was a broken nose." He rubbed the bridge of his nose. "So, if you don't want to spend the rest of this term grounded, my boy, and scrubbing my classroom with a toothbrush, you will take my advice."

"Yes, sir," Harry promised, and gave his father a lopsided grin.

Severus turned to Holly. "Is there anything else you would like to ask me, Holly? I have known the Malfoys for several years, Narcissa went to Hogwarts with me and I have also met Draco several times. I think . . . though he may resemble Lucius, he is not like him in spirit."

"You do?" there was hope in her voice now. "Good, 'cause I don't want him to hate me too, like my fa-Lucius does."

"Oh, child. I do not think Draco is his father's son," Severus began, putting an arm about her. "There is much of his mother in him."

"And even if he is a jerk and doesn't like you, Holl, you'll always have us. You're a Snape too. Dad and I will like you no matter what." Harry reassured her.

She gave him a sweet smile. "Thanks, Harry." But a part of her still feared that this new relative of hers, the only other blood relation she had save Lucius, would also reject her. She felt conflicted and anxious and it was then that she recalled her journal. She wriggled free of Severus's arm and said quietly, "I think I need to go and write in my journal, Sev."

The Potions Master nodded in understanding. "Go on then. It's a lot for you to take in at once, I know."

"Yeah. I just need to be alone for a bit." Holly said, then she turned and ran into her room to write down her feelings in her journal.

"Will she be okay, Dad?" she heard Harry ask worriedly, as she was shutting her door.

"Yes, I think she will. It's a shock, but she's a strong girl, Harry. She'll deal with it. And if she needs us, we're right here."

Holly grinned. She liked it when Severus said she was a strong girl. Like her mother. And Elizabeth the First. Elizabeth had half-siblings too, a brother and a sister, just like Holly. The girl pulled out a ballpoint Susan had given her and her blue journal and began to write.

Tonight I learned I've got a brother I never knew about. He's my father's son, his name is Draco and I hope he doesn't think I'm a worthless Squib the way my father Lucius does. Except Lucius isn't my dad anymore . . .not since Severus rescued me from the snow. HE's my dad now . . .even though we're not blood, he's my dad here, in my heart. Maybe one day I can get up the nerve to call him Dad, like Harry does. He's the first grown-up since Mum died that's cared about me and I wish I really was his daughter.

But guess you can't have everything. And I'm lucky to have him and Harry to be there for me.

Harry's the best big brother, I think, he even said he'd beat up Draco if he was mean to me. I really hope that doesn't happen and not just 'cause I don't want Harry to get in trouble. Draco's my brother too and I'd like to have two brothers, as long as he's not like Daddy-I mean Lucius-all snotty and full of himself. Wonder what his mum's like? Will she like me? Hope she's not like the wicked stepmother in Cinderella that I read about in Severus's library. Least I won't have to live with her. I really really hope they like me . . .I'm sick and tired of wizards making fun of me and talking trash about me just 'cause I don't have a lot of magic. I'm still a person, aren't I?

Sev says I can be whatever I want to be, but sometimes I wonder if that's true. He thinks it is, and he knows a lot more than I ever will so maybe . . . maybe I ought to believe him . . .

She felt herself drifting off to sleep in mid-word, and she dropped the pen and put her head down on her arm.

That was how Severus found her several hours later, asleep with her head on the open journal.

He gently closed it and placed it upon the nightstand, waved his wand and replaced her clothes with a nightgown and socks, for it was chilly in the dungeons this time of year. "Pleasant dreams, little one," he whispered as he tucked her in. He kissed her forehead and then departed.

He would meet with Narcissa tomorrow morning and together they would figure out a plan to incriminate Lucius, and take Draco away from the manor.

* * * * *

The next morning was a Saturday, and Severus rose early to go to Hogsmeade and meet Narcissa in disguise at the Hog's Head. He had instructed the children to go down to Hagrid's hut after they woke and ate breakfast in the hall, along with Silver, the gamekeeper wanted to show them how to properly care for the owl that had crashed into Harry, and help him feed and groom the unicorns.

"I should return around early afternoon, hopefully for lunch, but if not, you may either eat lunch with Hagrid or return to the hall and eat with Professor Dumbledore and McGonagall and the rest of the staff," Severus had told Harry just before saying good night to his son last night.

The Potions Master hurried and dressed in casual wizard attire, not his familiar Potion Master's robes, and cast a Glamour charm upon himself that altered his appearance to a short dumpy man with reddish hair and watery blue eyes, the total opposite of his actual appearance. He had sent a short note to Narcissa telling her what he

would look like and that he would meet her at the Hog's Head. She had written back saying she would be in disguise also, given him a description, and said she would be at the table in the right back corner. She had also asked him to please look after her injured owl, Shimmer.

Severus knew that Shimmer was in good hands with Hagrid, who cared for all living creatures, non-magical and magical, with compassion and competence. Not to mention outcast students as well, the other thought, hiding a slight smile. He knew that perfectly well, for he had once been one of Hagrid's outcasts, and the big man had taught him much about the Forbidden Forest and herbs that grew there that helped him immensely in creating potions. He had also taught the young Severus how to ignore the cruel taunts of his classmates by creating a space inside his head and going there when someone was insulting him. Make a shell round yerself, Sev, so whatever someone says t'you that's nasty, it'll bounce right off you. It had worked, for the most part, and he had used it during his days as a spy to distance himself from the horror he was forced to witness.

Confident that the gamekeeper would manage to keep the two kids out of trouble for the time being, Severus tucked his wand in his sleeve and then Apparated to the wizarding village just beyond the borders of Hogwarts, hoping to conclude his business with Narcissa in a timely fashion.

* * * * *

Holly awoke before Harry that morning, and after she had dressed and combed her hair, using some of the Hair Elixir Mindy, a Slytherin fifth year, had given her, to make her hair soft and silky, she went to shake awake her brother.

"Rise and shine, sleepyhead!"

"Ugghh!" Harry groaned, rolled over, and stuffed his head in his pillow. "Go 'way. It's not time to get up."

"C'mon, Harry. I want to eat breakfast and then help Hagrid." She shook his shoulder insistently.

Harry cracked open an eyelid and grumbled, "Who died and made you my mum?"

She rolled her eyes at him. "Don't be a grouch. Get up! Before all the good food is gone and all that's left is cold oatmeal." She grimaced, for she had eaten cold oatmeal before, and while it tasted horrid, it was not half as bad as some of the other things she had scrounged from the trash.

"That'd never happen here," mumbled her brother. "Lemme sleep, Holl."

She huffed exasperatedly. "Harry James Snape if you don't get up in like five minutes, I'm going to . . .pour freezing water down your pants."

Both eyes popped open. "You wouldn't DARE!"

"Wouldn't I?" she said, an impish smirk on her face.

"You do that and I'll . . .I'll . . ." he fumbled for a suitable threat, but was too sleepy to come up with one. "I'll make you sorry!"

"Uh huh. Sure you will." She stuck her tongue out at him. "I'll be waiting in the den with Silver. You've got five minutes."

Then she sashayed out of his room, leaving a rather stunned Harry lying on his bed, wondering if Holly actually had the nerve to do what she had said. Something about her tone and the way she had looked at him, similar to the way his father sometimes looked, made him think she might actually follow through with her threat.

He yawned and buried his face in his pillow. Merlin, but she was forgetting who was the older kid around here! It was supposed to be the other way around! Wasn't it?

I'm just gonna close my eyes for a few seconds. It's so warm and comfy here, and I'm not all that hungry yet, and Hagrid will wait on us, even if we did promise we'd be there around ten o'clock, and it's nine

now, he thought lazily, darting a quick glance at the Snitch-shaped clock on his nightstand. Slowly, his eyes closed and he slipped back into the realm of dreams.

Only to be awakened by a cascade of freezing water hitting his bottom and the backs of his thighs.

"AHHHH!

Icy water ran in rivulets down his legs, his pajamas and part of his mattress were soaked and he was now very wide awake.

He sat bolt upright, his teeth chattering, and yelled, "Holly Amanda Sinclair, you are so-o-o dead!"

His sister was standing a few feet away from his bed, a plastic pitcher in her hand, giggling hysterically. "I warned you, Harry!" She sniggered uncontrollably at the sight of her brother, dripping wet, his hair sticking out every which way, indignant as cat stuck in a bathtub. "You shoulda believed me!"

"You little brat!" he growled, then yelped as he sat up on something very cold and slippery. "Arghhh! You put ice down my shorts!"

Holly howled in mirth as Harry jumped up and began doing a strange hopping dance across the carpet, trying to remove the ice from his shorts.

"It's not funny, you sly little . . ." he cried, wriggling in embarrassment, for his backside now felt tinglingly numb .

"Gotcha, Harry!" Holly laughed, clutching her sides.

Harry squirmed and twisted about for a few more minutes until the ice had fallen out of his pajama bottoms, then he gave the giggling imp a Snape glare and said, "One night, I'm gonna tip you and your bed into a bath of ice water, swear by Merlin's hat!"

"Wanna bet?" she smirked at him, then she ran, because Harry had a wicked gleam in his eyes and had grabbed up his practice wand.

"Just wait . . .till I get you . . .I'll teach you to prank your big brother!" Harry threatened, pretending to be angry.

He chased her all around the apartment, finally cornering her in the kitchen against the sink. "Ah ha! Now you're gonna pay!"

"No! Please! It was a joke!" she half-pleaded, holding out her hands.

"So's this!" Her brother snickered, then shot a jet of water from his wand, soaking her.

"Ahhh! It's cold! No fair!" she shrieked, trying to cover herself.

"Is too! You started it!" he pointed out. "Now you look like the Little Mermaid!"

"W-well at l-least that's b-better than looking like a d-drowned penguin!"

"Huh? What's that supposed to mean?"

She imitated the way he had been jumping and dancing about moments before and suddenly Harry quit being annoyed and started laughing instead. He laughed and laughed, and Holly laughed with him, the two of them nearly prostrate on the floor with mirth.

Silver, who had watched the two chase each other with resigned amusement, now padded into the kitchen and cast them a look of mild reproof.

Seeing it, the two giggled even harder, and Harry said impudently, "Okay, Uncle Remus, we'll be good! Not!"

Silver sat down and heaved a sigh, careful to avoid the puddles on the floor.

At last the two managed to quit laughing and then Holly looked around and said, "Harry, we'd better clean this up, before Severus has our hides. I don't wanna be grounded for life."

Harry looked at the kitchen floor, which resembled a small lake, and nodded. "Me either. Okay, now how did that cleaning charm go again?"

* * * * *

They managed to get down to breakfast around nine-thirty, clean and dressed, leaving the suite spic and span, though Harry was still making sly threats about dunking Holly in an ice-cold bathtub. Or maybe the Black Lake. But Holly wasn't fazed, she knew him too well.

They were greeted pleasantly by Albus, Minerva, Professor Sprout and Madam Hooch. Both children remembered their manners and said good morning politely, then helped themselves to the steaming platters of eggs, sausage, bacon, toast, and pancakes dripping with maple syrup.

The water fight had made both children work up a good appetite, and they ate until they were stuffed, then excused themselves and headed down to Hagrid's hut. Silver followed a short ways behind, watchful and alert, until the children were safely inside, then he lay down on the porch with his head on his paws and napped for awhile.

"Hiya Harry! Hello, Holly! How's yer morning going?"

"Wet," replied Harry.

Hagrid looked puzzled. "I don' unnerstand. It's a beautiful morning."

Harry looked at Holly and grinned. "It's a little joke," he explained and his sister giggled. "Where's the owl? Did you find out who she belonged to?"

"Yup. Professor Snape tol' me her name is Shimmer and she belongs to a lady named Narcissa. She's in here," he beckoned them into his small cottage, where the pretty silver owl was perched in a cage, one wing splinted, sleeping. "There she is. Cracked a few wing bones, but its nothin' that won't heal in a week or so thanks to yer dad's Bone Knit Elixir, Harry."

"Poor thing!" Holly said, moving closer to peer at the bird through the cage bars. "She's very pretty, like moonlight on snow." She reached out a finger to touch the bird, but Hagrid captured her hand.

"Careful, Holly! She might take a nip at ya, since she ain't feeling so well right now, an' she don't know you. So just look at her for a bit, all right?"

"Oh, sure, Hagrid. Sorry."

"Don't be sorry, jus' be careful," Hagrid said gently, not wanting to make her feel bad.

He opened the owl's cage, and removed her water and food, telling the children that owls needed fresh owl pellets and water every day and a sick owl needed more food and water multiple times a day. They also needed to be kept warm, which was why her cage was next to his black stove and he showed them a soft blue blanket that he placed over the cage at night to keep Shimmer free from drafts.

"Another thing y'gotta remember is that owls don't like loud noises, so y'gotta speak soft and move slow around them, see?"

Holly and Harry soaked up his lesson like sponges and helped Hagrid clean out the owl's cage and refill her food and water dishes and the gamekeeper let them each stroke the sleepy owl as a reward for doing a good job.

Then he gave them soft brushes and currycombs and told them to go out to the corral and start grooming the unicorns. This was something they had already learned how to do, and they needed no further urging.

Harry had just finished rubbing Magic's coat with a soft cloth, making the golden hide sparkle like a thousand Galleons, when suddenly a brown streak jumped up on top of the fence, meowing urgently.

Harry turned around and Magic whickered nervously. "Hey! It's Mrs. Norris."

The tabby meowed again, her tail lashing, pacing up and down the fence.

"Something's wrong," Holly said, feeling an instinctive tremor of fear flutter through her. "She hardly ever leaves the castle." She extended her hand to pet the cat, who rubbed up against her and meowed sharply.

"What's wrong? Is it Mr. Filch?" Harry wondered.

Mrs. Norris gave another yowl, then jumped off the fence and trotted back towards the castle, looking over her shoulder.

"I think she wants us to follow her, Harry."

"Yeah, but . . .what about Duchess and Dancer? We haven't brushed them yet."

Suddenly, Dancer moved and nudged Harry hard, shoving him toward the gate.

"Hey! What's with you?"

"She wants us to go with Mrs. Norris." Holly guessed, and Duchess snorted and bumped her too, urging her towards the gate as well.

The cat glanced over her shoulder and meowed anxiously.

"C'mon, Holly!" her brother said, opening the gate and running after the tabby.

The slender girl was quick to follow, waving goodbye to the unicorns and latching the gate before she raced after her brother.

Silver woke and scrambled to his feet, running after the trio, puzzled but alert.

Mrs. Norris led them rapidly across the lawn and up to the castle proper, then stood meowing and pawing at the great double doors

until Harry opened them. Then she dashed inside and the two scampered after her to the Great Hall. It was nearly lunch time and several students were loitering about the stairs inbetween periods, talking and exchanging good-natured groans about their classes.

The cat scratched furiously at the doors to the hall, prompting several students to snicker derisively. "Look at that batty kitty! Must have inhaled too much cat grass!"

"Yeah, she's high all right. Either that or just plain stupid."

"Or loony! Crazy cat! She's inhaled too many potion fumes!"

Harry and Holly ignored the mocking jeers and opened the doors. Mrs. Norris dashed inside.

The two youngsters slipped in right afterwards and then halted, their mouths agape at the sight that greeted their eyes.

Mrs. Norris was sitting in the middle of the floor leading up to the staff table, peering upwards anxiously, mewing in distress. For there, suspended some forty feet in the air, by what appeared to be a pair of old-fashioned red suspenders, dressed only in his skivvies, upside down, was Argus Filch.

Around the steward's skinny neck was a plaque which read-Come One, Come All and See the Stinking Buzzard!

Silver gave a sharp whine and then growled angrily. Clearly he didn't find the steward's predicament funny in the least.

"Merlin!" Holly gasped, her hands flying to her mouth. "Mr. Filch, are you okay?"

The old man groaned, spinning about like a puppet. His eyes were glassy and his face a strange shade of purple from hanging upside down like a side of beef.

"How'd he get up there?" Harry wondered, horrified. "Must have been magic."

Before they could move, the doors opened and several groups of students came in.

They immediately caught sight of Filch hanging in full view, and shrieks of astonishment and laughter exploded from them. Fingers pointed and several students cackled loudly, clearly enjoying the sight of the Squib on display.

"Scrawny buzzard!"

"Dirty Squib! Serves you right!"

"Eeew!" shrilled a girl. "Don't he ever wash his pants?"

Filch struggled, his eyes bulging, and his face turning a slight blue color. But he could not free himself and even if he had been able to, he would have plunged to his death. All he could do was hang there, helpless as a baby, half-naked in front of half the school in a humiliating tableau of a trussed bird, for whoever had done this had wrapped the red suspenders about his ankles, the way you would tie a plucked chicken.

The hall rang with the students' laughter, and Holly spun around, furious. "Stop it!" she yelled, her fists clenched. "Stop laughing and help him get down! He could suffocate! Look how red his face is!"

But the other students were too busy poking fun at the steward to be bothered listening to her, and she turned to Harry and cried, "Harry, we need help! But all the teachers are in class still."

"I know! We'll go see Professor Dumbledore. He'll know what to do."

"You know the password to his office?"

"Yes, he told me when we first got here." Harry said. He glared at the sea of smirking students. "Stupid dumb gits!"

Then he raced out of the hall, Holly hot on his heels.

Five minutes later, Albus was awakened from his afternoon nap by a strident pounding upon his office door.

"Huh? Merlin bless!"

"Professor Dumbledore! Professor Dumbledore!" screamed the two Snape children. "Open up, quick! It's an emergency! Help!"

Dumbledore yanked open the office door to see two very distressed children standing there. Holly was crying quietly and Harry looked like he wanted to hex someone into the next country. "What's wrong, children?"

"Professor, you gotta come quick!" Harry grabbed the old wizard's hand. "Somebody played a nasty prank on Mr. Filch and strung him up in the Great Hall!"

"On Argus?"

"Upside down and . . .naked 'cept for his . . .uh . . .underpants . . ."
Holly added, blushing. "And he's all red and purple, like he's suffocating, sir!" She seized his other hand and they began tugging him down the stairs. "You've got to help him! Everyone else is just standing there laughing!"

Dumbledore's eyes flashed cobalt lightning. Normally, he was tolerant of pranks, having played more than a few himself when he was a boy. But he had always made certain they were harmless and fun, not wicked and he never played them on those who could not get their own back. The prank that the two had described was nothing short of malicious, not to mention dangerous, because poor Argus could not free himself without causing grievous bodily harm to his person.

The Headmaster sprinted down the stairs, and Harry and Holly were hard pressed to keep up with him. They had never known the old wizard could move so fast, nor look so fierce, like a dragon about to go on a rampage. It was positively scary.

Harry shot a glance at his sister and whispered, "Merlin's bloody robe, Holl. But I'm sure glad we had nothing to do with this prank on Filch.

'Cause whoever did is gonna get their arses kicked from here to New York by the Headmaster, or my name isn't Harry James Snape."

"Good! Whoever did this ought to get the hide walloped off them!" cried Holly, sniffing back angry tears.

The doors to the Great Hall burst open and all heads turned towards the entrance, eyes wide and mouths hanging open.

"SILENCE!" thundered Albus, and power fairly crackled in the air about him, making his hair and beard stand on end.

Everyone froze and the hall stilled immediately.

It was so quiet you could have heard a mouse breathing.

Albus strode into the hall, his purple robes billowing, his normal congenial expression replaced by a thunderous scowl that Severus would have envied.

Yup. Somebody's arse is dead meat, Harry thought, unable to suppress both a shiver of dread and awe.

Albus pointed his wand and the suspenders slipped free of the struts on the ceiling and he gently levitated the stricken Argus slowly through the air and down on to a stretcher. "There, old friend. I'm going to Floo you to the infirmary and let Poppy see to you." He took off his moon and stars cloak and draped it over Filch's body, and Mrs. Norris mewed pathetically and jumped up on her master's chest, sitting on him like a furry sentinel.

"The infirmary!" Albus snapped, throwing Floo Powder into the fireplace, before levitating Argus's stretcher through.

"Albus, what in Merlin's name?" squawked a startled Poppy. "Asclepius! Oh Argus, what did those miserable children do to you now?"

"Take care of him, Poppy." Albus ordered. "I'll be down shortly to see how he is. But first, I have other business to tend to." He turned

slowly from the fireplace to face the students gathered in the hall, a look of vast disappointment and stern anger upon his face.

The students trembled, unable to move, and Albus raked them all with his lightning stare before saying softly, in a voice that crackled with disapproval, "Now. I want to know who is responsible for Mr. Filch's condition. If you know something about how he came to be here, step forward. Because all of you will remain here until someone tells me the truth. Well?"

He swiveled his head about, frowning at each and every student in the room.

Not one met his gaze. They shuffled and coughed and looked at their shoes or the floor, but no one spoke, and Harry hugged Holly and silently thanked Merlin he was not in trouble this time, for Albus's anger scared him even worse than his father's. And now he understood why his father said no one crossed Albus Dumbledore in a temper more than once.

The silence stretched on endlessly until after about twenty minutes a small cough came from a knot of students at the back of the hall, close to the dais where the staff sat.

"Sir? I think I know who did it."

So . . .who did it???

You'll have to wait to find out!

Yes, I know I am evil! But please R& R!

Next: Severus mounts a rescue mission with Narcissa at Malfoy Manor.

Infiltrating Malfoy Manor

Severus walked casually down the street of Hogsmeade, confident that his Glamour charm would not be penetrated. In all of his years as a spy, the charm had served him well, and saved his life on more than one occasion. For that he had Albus to thank, who had taught him the faerie way of casting glamours, which he had learned from his late son, the half-sprite, Julian. According to Albus, Julian had a natural talent for concealment, as well as mischief. Severus could tell that the Headmaster had loved the boy very much, no matter how much of a scamp he had been. "He would have been just your age, Severus, had he lived," Albus had said wistfully just this past December. Severus had merely nodded, not knowing what else to say. The loss of a child was not something he ever wished to know, and he could not imagine how Albus must feel, having lost not just one, but two children, and his beloved wife as well. And yet, Albus still managed to laugh at life, and look at his life with that damnable twinkle in his eyes. Unless, Severus mused, that was a carefully orchestrated act. His mentor had taught him much about being a spy, more than he could have ever learned from a book.

There was more to Albus Dumbledore than met the eye, very much more. Once Severus had asked him why he taught when he could have been a much more prominent figure in the wizarding world. "You could have become Minister of Magic, Albus. They offered you the position, didn't they?"

"Indeed, my boy. But I turned it down," the old wizard chuckled. "Who wants to have all the wizarding world looking up to you for answers. It's a thankless job and not one that I need to burden myself with, Severus. I much prefer to oversee the children, and to guide and mentor the young people who will one day shape the future. That is all the reward I need. Teaching is harder than running a country sometimes, as you well know."

Oh, Severus did know. And yet, like Albus, he would not trade it for another profession. Despite his snarky strict attitude, Severus found he enjoyed passing on his hard-earned knowledge to the young wizards-provided they appreciated his subject and did not sass him or act arrogant and all-knowing.

Enough, Snape. Concentrate on the task at hand, you can go woolgathering down memory lane another time, he scolded himself sternly.

He arrived at the Hog's Head and pushed open the door to the pub.

Like most of its kind, the pub was dimly lit by Lumos-spelled globes, smoky and redolent with the odor of pipe tobacco and cigarettes, though the floorboards were clean and scrubbed to a high gloss, as were the tables and chairs. There were few patrons in the pub at this hour of the morning, and Severus gave a quick nod to the barkeep and held up two fingers.

"Two pints, coming up, mate," the barkeep grinned, then began filling a tankard with the dark amber brew the Hog's Head was famous for.

Severus made a quick scan of the room, then made his way casually over to a table in the corner, where a young man with ebony hair and bright hazel eyes was sitting, wrapped in a nondescript sheepskin duster and patched boots and a green scarf.

"Hello, Hobbs," he greeted, making up an alias for the disguised Narcissa on the fly.

"Hello, O'Rourke," answered Narcissa, striving to keep from breaking out into tears of relief. She had been terrified that he would not show, and her last hope of getting help to rescue her son would be gone. "Been awhile."

"Aye, it has." Severus seated himself and gave her a quick smile, then clasped the other's hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. He saw some of the tension go out of the witch afterwards, and continued with his casual conversation. "Been keepin', how about you?"

"Oh, I'm fine. Working hard, but I figgered I could use a break and so here I am."

The barkeep brought two pints of foamy dark ale to the table and Severus slipped him a few Knuts as payment. "Enjoy, mates."

Severus took a casual sip of his ale and nudged the other over to Narcissa.

She made a face, but then lifted her pint and drank a little, knowing it would appear strange if she were in a pub and not drinking. But she disliked the taste of ale.

Once Severus was certain the barkeep was not watching, he cast a quick non-verbal Muffliato charm over the table and then leaned in and said, "Have you been in contact with Draco since you left?"

Narcissa hesitated. "Is it safe, to talk here?"

"Yes. No one can overhear us. Well?"

"Yes, I received a letter from him just the other day. He said everything is almost the same there, except Lucius has taken to accompanying him to his tutor's before work and asking Doby to report to him when Draco arrives home. Draco complains it feels like he's being watched all the time, but Lucius hasn't forbidden him not to fly his broom or leave the house." She gripped the mug hard, till her knuckles whitened. "Severus, I must get him away from there. Lucius might not harm him right now, but . . .I don't trust him. I want my son away from him. When I first married him, I thought Lucius was wonderful. He was handsome, charming, he had money and presence, and he . . .he seemed to love me."

"A cobra can charm his mate, but it doesn't last," Severus observed.

"True. I did not know what he was until after Draco was a year old. Only then did he tell me he was a follower of . . .of You-Know-Who. Only then did I see that the face he presented to me was false. But by then it was too late."

"We all make mistakes, Narcissa. The important thing is to learn from them. I would not leave any child in Lucius's hands, but especially not Holly."

"I can understand that, after what he did to her, and yet, you surprise me, Severus."

"I do? In what way?"

"You care very much for her, don't you? A Squib, daughter of one of your worst enemies."

Severus raised an eyebrow, but with his glamour it didn't look quite as impressive. "You find that remarkable, that I could come to love a child like that? Why? Because you believe she is . . . inferior?"

Narcissa shook her head. "No, and get off your moral high horse, Snape. I find it remarkable that you can love one who is not of your blood. I would never wish harm upon the girl, but . . . I do not know if I could come to care for her the way I do Draco. And it has nothing to do with her being Lucius's byblow."

"Narcissa, blood is not everything." Severus declared, looking directly into her eyes. "I would lay down my life for my students, were it called for, and they are not related to me in the least. But I am responsible for their safety and were harm to come calling, I would be ready to defend them. I would lay down my life for Holly as well. It would not even be a question. She is my daughter now, as Harry is my son. I would like to try and make a deal with Lucius, to get him to relinquish his paternity claim, so that I may legally adopt her."

Narcissi blinked. "You'd be making a deal with the devil, Severus."

"I have done that before," Severus said dryly. "In return I would pledge not to reveal what I know of his actions regarding Holly to Cornelius Fudge. His precious reputation would be safe."

The witch laughed harshly. "From you, perhaps. Once I get my son, I intend to go to my solicitor and file for a divorce, and I don't care if the press knows about it."

"Is that wise, Cissa?"

"Wise or not, it is what he deserves. I intend to expose him for what he is and perhaps get him locked away for the duration of his life. I want to be free of him, Severus, not looking over my shoulder every second. Make whatever deal you want, and let me take care of my own. For once, I want Lucius to get what's coming to him!"

"I understand. Retrieving Draco is the first step." Severus paused and drank some more ale, motioning for Narcissa to do likewise. Then he continued, "What kinds of traps and wards are upon the manor?"

Narcissa began to describe the ones she knew about, and Severus listened intently. Some of the wards were standard, things that almost every wizard worthy of the name could put on their home to keep out unwanted trespassers. Others, however, were unique to Malfoy Manor.

"There may be more than what I've mentioned," she cautioned. "I have no idea what he might have done since I've been gone. Although Draco doesn't think he's done anything to the defenses since I left a few days ago."

"He may not be aware of it, since he's not up to reading wards yet," Severus cautioned. "Well, we will simply have to be on our guard and ever vigilant. When would you like to begin this rescue mission, Narcissa?"

"As soon as possible. I'm afraid Lucius might suddenly decide to send Draco somewhere else, or perhaps try and make him into an Initiate of the Dark Path."

"He's a bit young for that, Cissa. He's only what . . . ten?"

"Lucius likes to start them young," said the former Mrs. Malfoy, with a hint of bitterness in her tone. "That way by the time he's sixteen, he'll be ready to take the Mark." Her hands clenched over her tankard. "But I refuse to let that happen. My son will not be his father's shadow. Not if I have anything to say about it."

"Calm down," Severus soothed. "Let us go and scout the grounds. You did say Lucius normally works extra hours on the weekends?"

"Yes, when Fudge requests it of him. Then he gets days off during the week as compensation. Draco said he'll be in his office at the Ministry until three o'clock."

"Good. Plenty of time for us to see what we're up against." Severus finished off his ale. "Drink the rest, and then we can be off."

Narcissa eyed the dark brown liquid with distaste. "Horrid stuff! How you men can stomach this is beyond me." But she swallowed the rest gamely.

"Actually, I don't really care for ale much myself," Severus admitted. "I prefer a good white wine. But we must keep up appearances." Then he cancelled the Muffliato spell and said, loud enough to be overheard, "All right, Hobbs. Let's go over to your flat and we'll catch the rest of the match, aye?" He deepened his voice and gave it a soft burr.

"Sounds good to me, O'Rourke," agreed Narcissa, then she followed Severus out the door and then they both Apparated to Malfoy Manor.

They arrived at the edge of a well-manicured sweep of green lawn that surrounded a great gray stone manor house. The house was three stories high with a Gothic style roof with gargoyles and crenellated columns flanking a large porch with huge mahogany carved double doors with a silver dragon head knocker on them. Neat clipped bushes lined the long flagstone walk up to the house and at the end of the walk was a marble pillar with the Malfoy crest engraved on a silver medallion, which was a wyvern biting a flaming sword.

It looked like the prosperous home of a rich nobleman or a businessman, no one would have expected a lingering aura of Dark magic to surround it, nor that the man who was its master was cold, cruel, and evil to the core. Severus tensed as he approached the lawn, his spell had deposited him a few feet beyond it, and he could sense the oily feel of black magic, it overlay the protective wards surrounding the grounds like a film of scum-laden polluted water. His lip curled involuntarily, but he suppressed his initial stomach-churning wave of revulsion. This was not the first time he had encountered a

dark aura, though it had been years since he'd had to endure the dark taint. But he had not forgotten it.

Narcissa, who had now cast off her glamour, appeared beside him, and shivered upon sensing the dark aura. "He's done something, the black taint was never so strong."

"Are you certain?" Severus inquired softly. "Sometimes, when you are accustomed to living with something for so long, your senses adjust to it and it doesn't register with you until you are away from it."

"No. He's changed the wards, I can feel it." She extended one well-manicured hand and there was a sudden crackle and a flash of reddish light. She yanked her hand back, shaking it in pain. "Merlin's blasted rod, but he's keyed the wards against me, Severus!"

The former spy held up a hand. "Hush. A minor setback. We can mask your aura, Narcissa, so your signature doesn't register with the wards."

She threw him a blank look. "How? I never learned any spell that could do that."

"Fortunate that I did," remarked the secret agent. He drew his wand and made a few passes with it, muttering several detection spells. After a few minutes, he nodded and turned back to Narcissa. "Lucius has interwoven some extra spells into them, but they shouldn't be too difficult to breach, not compared to some others I've encountered, like those upon the Dark One's fortress in the Carpathian Mountains."

"But if you shatter them . . . Lucius will know we were here."

Severus favored her with a disappointed frown. "Really, Narcissa, give me some credit for intelligence. I didn't survive for years as a spy by being an imbecile and rushing around like a dolt. We won't need to shatter the wards, merely mask ourselves and slip past them." He pointed his wand and chanted a spell, and a greenish mist hovered over Narcissa, before settling down around her.

She gasped, for the mist was freezing, it felt as if every pore of her body had been invaded by needles of ice. "Ahhh! Severus, this . . .hurts!"

"Yes, it's unpleasant, but you'll only have to bear it for a few minutes." He said, then cast the spell upon himself, grimacing as it took effect.

Narcissa trembled sharply for a minute, before saying angrily, "You might have warned me, damn it!"

"Had I told you it would hurt, you would have tensed up and it would have been worse," responded Severus calmly. "Come, we can enter the grounds now."

He glided forward, and Narcissa noted in awe that he hardly seemed to be touching the ground as he walked. The wards did not even flicker as he set foot upon the lawn. How does he do that? Walk like a ghost? She made haste to follow, for she had no way of knowing how long the masking charm would last.

This time there was no crackle or flash of light. The wards permitted her entry as one who belonged.

Severus moved across the lawn cautiously, concentrating on feeling for any unexpected magical presences. He knew Lucius would have other defenses up besides the wards and the carnivorous venomous Tantagula Plant Narcissa had told him about.

The trick was to discover them before he or Narcissa blundered into them.

He had almost reached the walk, and he hesitated before setting a boot on it, examining it with his sorcerer's sight. All wizards possessed the sight to varying degrees, it was an innate part of a magic-wielder, but few were taught how to use the sight beyond recognizing auras or enchantments placed upon an object. Severus, in his role as a spy, had developed his natural sight far beyond it, and he allowed his conscious mind to shift into a hyper aware state, and his sight showed him that some of the stones on the walk had been enchanted, they glowed a sickly black to his magical sight.

"What's wrong?" hissed his companion, throwing a lock of pale hair behind her ear. She had never felt so uneasy or so frightened, and to think this had once been her home, and she had come and gone from it without ever thinking about the traps her husband had set up.

"There is an enchantment upon the walk. Watch where I step and follow me exactly." Severus ordered. He stepped carefully upon a large gray flagstone, then stepped over to the left and up one to set both feet upon a red colored stone and then a white one.

The pale witch obeyed, copying him, thinking inanely that it looked as if Snape were playing an odd game of hopscotch. One red square, one white, now jump to a gray one. She just hoped her son wasn't watching from a window, he would think they had gone utterly mad.

Severus was concentrating very hard upon the path, and had almost made it to the stairs leading up to the double doors when the venomous Tantagula awoke and slithered across his path, hissing furiously.

The Tantagula bore several round pods upon its thorny vines and these now split apart and were filled with several rows of curving fangs, like those of a viper. They lashed at the Potions Master, and Severus was forced to jump backwards to avoid the plant's strike.

He was uncertain as to what had caused the plant to awaken, until he cast a glance back at his companion, and saw that Narcissa had mistakenly stepped upon an enchanted stone.

"Severus! I can't move!" she wailed, trying to pull her foot free of the walk without any success. "It's caught me!"

The Tantagula, sensing easy prey, crackled and surged forward. Narcissa went utterly white, for the plant could devour a cow in about five minutes, its venom was acidic and the many heads upon the tentacle-like vine could strip flesh from bone in minutes.

"Stop moving!" snapped the Potions Master. "It is drawn to movement like a moth to a flame."

"Merlin save me!" Narcissa whimpered and froze.

The Tantagula hissed, its tentacle heads probing the air, searching for the prey it had sensed. It covered the whole front of the walk now.

Severus, who was safe upon a large white flagstone, deliberately stomped his boot, knowing the movement would cause the plant to turn towards him, and away from the helpless witch.

Sure enough, the carnivorous plant whipped about and lunged at him.

Snape snarled a Withering Curse, and the spell blasted into the plant like a meteor, striking the Tantagula head on.

The Tantagula started to rot and wither, shrieking furiously, and thrashing about futilely. It writhed and curled in upon itself, scraping the walk as it shrank away across the lawn, critically injured.

"Oh, thank Merlin, you were so quick, Severus!" Narcissa said gratefully.

Severus nodded, then frowned. "You must be more careful, Narcissa." Then he pointed his wand and hissed, "Finite Incantatem."

Narcissa felt the spell holding her to the walk dissipate and she pulled her foot onto the safe red square with a huge sigh of relief. "I'm sorry. I only brushed against the wrong tile." She looked uncertainly at the Potions Master. "Where do I step next?"

"The gray stone to the right, and then two stones up to the white one," he instructed.

That brought her even with Severus and then he could lead the way once more.

"How do you know where to walk?"

"Sorcerer's sight," he replied shortly. "I can see where a spell has been placed and know where to avoid it."

They resumed their odd hopping dance until they were upon the porch stairs.

Then Severus held up a hand again, and began looking for more traps.

Narcissa glanced up, for she felt more than heard something above them.

A great skeletal wyvern with shredded wings dove upon them from the roof, screaming in fury.

"Look out, Snape!"

Her warning came a scant second too late.

Severus managed to jerk a hand up just before the wyvern's bony talons closed upon his arm, biting deep into his flesh.

The black-garbed wizard cursed and gasped, trying to fend off the beast as best he could, but the sheer size of the thing knocked him down.

The skeletal wyvern howled and opened its jaws, ready to tear the trespassing wizard to shreds.

Until Narcissa cast a Shattering Curse upon it and blew it apart.

Bits and pieces of bone rained down upon them, but Severus managed to get to his feet, one hand clamped about his arm, which was bleeding badly.

"Are you all right?"

"I'll live," Severus answered through gritted teeth. He withdrew a flask from a pocket of his robes and sprinkled it upon the jagged laceration. The bleeding halted and the wound sealed itself somewhat. "I'll see to

it later," he said, and ripped off a strip of his sleeve and bound it tightly.

Then he removed a yellow potion from another pocket and gulped its contents. "Antitoxin. Just in case." He gave her a slight smile. "You aren't so bad yourself in the combat department, Cissa."

She blushed. "I earned top scores in my NEWTS for Defense, but Lucius would never permit me to train as an Auror. Said it wasn't fitting for his wife to be employed like some middle-class hedge witch. I haven't had to use anything like that for years."

"You did well. Thank you," Severus said, then resumed dowsing for evil influences.

There was a spell upon the door itself, though Snape was unable to determine its exact nature.

Before he could cast another revealing charm, the dragon knocker upon the door opened its eyes and spoke. "Whosoever desires to pass the threshold must first answer three questions. Succeed and you may enter Malfoy Manor. Fail and your magic is forfeit."

Both wizards exchanged glances.

"A Riddle Test?" Narcissa queried, half to herself. "I thought he had disabled that particular ward a long time ago, ever since it nearly drained Cornelius Fudge one time when he showed up unexpectedly."

"Would you know the answers to the questions?"

"Yes, unless he's changed them." She turned to the dragon knocker. "Guardian, what is thy first question?"

"A simple one, my lady," sneered the dragon. "What is the motto of the most high and pure Malfoy family and what is their crest?"

"Typical." Narcissa snorted and Severus cast his eyes heavenward. "You never did miss a chance to proclaim your pureblood status to

the heavens, Luc." She cleared her throat and responded, "The motto of the most pure Malfoys is "Power lies in purity and greatness in power." And the crest is of a wyvern rampant upon a bloodred field holding a flaming sword in its jaws."

"Correct." The dragon turned to Severus. "Your turn. What most potent potion did Margrave Malfoy develop that gained him renown throughout the wizarding world?"

Severus sighed. "Lucius, you are so predictable." Then he answered the waiting dragon. "Margrave Malfoy developed a Nerve Stimulant Elixir, which is used in combating the effects of the Cruciatus Curse." But not out of any wish to end suffering, he wanted to be able to torture Muggleborns more effectively, and that enabled him to keep his victims alive longer, thought the Potions Master with a sneer. Still, the potion did work and it proved the old adage that something good could come out of something bad.

"Correct. All hail the Malfoy name!"

Then it looked at Narcissa. "Next question. Cousin to fire, yet born of ice am I, dweller in the midnight sun, the wind my companion, out of legend I arise, but forgotten is my name. What am I?"

Narcissa thought for several minutes. She knew the answer to this riddle, it had been one of the first Lucius had designed, but it had been long since she had studied the riddle game. She struggled to recall the answer, then all at once she recalled a toy Draco had once had, a white and blue tinged replica of an "Ice dragon!" she cried. "Cousin to a dragon, who breathes fire, yet it alone breathes ice and lives in the far north, where hardly anything dwells save the wind, it is so rare most wizards have forgotten they even exist."

"Very good. You are more intelligent than you look," said the dragon, chuckling. "Ready, sour puss?" it smirked at Severus's glower. "A stone, a wand, and a cloak, three brothers possessed, but then lost, vanished without a trace, bringing ruin upon all who find them. Of what do I speak?"

Severus replied a few moments later. "You speak of the Deathly Hallows. The three objects are the Resurrection Stone, the Elder Wand, and the Cloak of Invisibility."

The dragon seemed most put out. "Correct. Last question, pretty lady. If I were to add crushed snake fangs to a draught made from asphodel, unicorn horn, ground tansy, and shredded lupine, what would occur?"

Narcissa scowled. "Do you know the answer, Severus?" The Potions Master nodded.

"But he cannot answer! You must do so!" declared the knocker smugly. "Well?"

"Half a moment, you talking piece of melted tin!" snapped Narcissa, closing her eyes and trying to recall the potion ingredients for such a draught. Potions had never been her strongest subject, though she had done well in it.

At last she recalled a similar question on her NEWTS, and remembered that adding snake fangs to any solution containing unicorn hair would result in an explosion.

"Correct. You may pass." The dragon said, sounding very annoyed. Then it glared at Snape. "Final question, wizard. What was the name of Lucius Malfoy's dog he had as a child and what breed was it?"

"What the bloody hell kind of question is that?" demanded Severus.

"One with an answer. Do you know it, wizard?" the dragon inquired insolently.

Severus ground his teeth together. How the hell was he supposed to know about Lucius's pet that he had probably had twenty years ago, before Severus had ever known him? He threw an exasperated look at Narcissa, who looked very puzzled. "Do you know the answer, Narcissa?"

"I . . .I'm not sure . . .I could have sworn . . .we never had a pet recently . . ."

"Silence! You may not assist him!" yelled the knocker.

Severus wished he could simply curse the knocker into pieces, but he wasn't sure if that would break the spell over the entrance. There had to be a way to figure this out. He cudgelled his brain, trying to recall any instances where Lucius might have mentioned a favorite pet to him. Minutes passed, and the knocker sniggered.

"You're stumped! Admit it!"

"Quiet! I'm concentrating, you pompous arse-licking twit!"

"Humph! Really! Such language!"

What kind of name would Lucius come up with for a dog? What self-respecting dog would ever want to be his pet? Severus wondered. He thought of Hagrid's beloved Fang and that in turn triggered a memory of standing amid a circle of Death Eaters, with MacNair claiming that disemboweling that silly Prodgrass's mutt was easier than taking candy from a baby. "The fool will be weeping like a whipped child when he sees what's become of his pet, aye!" And Severus had fought to keep from hexing the evil bastard, only to have Lucius remark, in his cold patrician manner, "Dogs are overrated. Man's best friend, ha! Give me a cat or an owl any day of the week. The best cat I ever had was a Nightdusk Longhair named Swiftpaw. . ."

"I'm waiting! I haven't got all day here!" whined the dragon.

"Lucius Malfoy never had a dog, he had a cat named Swiftpaw, a Nightdusk Longhair, to be exact."

The dragon ground the ring between its jaws. "Blast! Correct. You may enter. Enjoy your stay at Malfoy Manor."

Then the double doors swung open and the two stepped over the threshold into the great marble tiled entrance hall.

Narcissa walked in first, glancing about warily, then saying softly, "Now where is Draco? I told him to be packed and ready to leave."

There was soft cough and a blond boy dressed in a gray cable knit sweater and black trousers emerged from the den off the entrance hall. "I'm here, Mother. What took you so long? Father might return any minute."

Narcissa rushed over and hugged her son, much to his embarrassment. "Draco, are you all right? He didn't . . . hurt you or anything, did he?" She cupped her son's face in her hands and eyed him worriedly.

"No, I've been careful to stay out of his way as much as possible. He's been in nasty temper." The boy suppressed a shiver.

"Come, Narcissa. We should leave," Severus said softly.

Draco's eyes widened. "Professor Snape? What are you doing here? My father said he would rip out your organs and roast them over a fire if he ever saw you here again."

"Wishful thinking," snorted the spy.

"Are you all set?"

"Yes, Mother. Where are we going?"

"You'll find out when you get there," Severus said briskly, then shrank the boy's trunk and owl cage and handed them to Narcissa. "Ready?"

Narcissa and Draco nodded. Then all three vanished with a loud snapping crack and Malfoy Manor stood empty of occupants, save for two house elves.

Next: The culprit who harmed Filch is revealed and Albus will not be lenient this time! How did you all like the guardians upon the manor?

The Culprit

All eyes in the Great Hall swiveled and stared at the small first year who had spoken, a skinny boy with reddish-brown hair and wide brown eyes in a Hufflepuff-crested robe. The kid shrank back a little at the stares of his classmates, some of which were hostile and others shocked and curious.

"Yes, David? Who played this cruel joke on Mr. Filch?" Dumbledore inquired softly, and his eyes lost some of their fire when he looked at the child. "Come here and tell me, if you would." He beckoned to the boy to approach him.

David quickly did so, reasoning that the safest place to be right then was by the Headmaster's side. "W-well, sir, you see, I was returning from Transfiguration, which is near to Defense Against the Dark Arts, and I heard Professor Throckmorton telling Shelby Cross that in order to cast some spell . . . I think it was called Levicorpus . . . he had to practice and Cross said practice on who and Professor Throckmorton said . . . said "Whoever's most expendable, somebody unimportant, that no one cares about." And Cross said "Sure, professor, I know someone," and then he left and I saw him go down the hall towards the dungeons and Filch's office."

"When was this, Mr. Solomon?" queried Dumbledore, ignoring the others' gasps and yells.

"Today, sir. I kind of followed Cross and heard him saying, real quiet like, to himself, "Squibs are always expendable. Who needs 'em? Waste of space, in my opinion. Too bad I couldn't practice on that useless kid of Snape's. But he'd turn me inside out and skin me. But there's another . . ." That's what he said, all right, sir."

Dumbledore's face clouded over again. "Are you certain, David?"

"Yes, sir. Then I went to Herbology, and when I came back here for lunch, Filch was hanging from the ceiling. Just the way you saw him. So if it was anybody, I'd say it's Cross."

"Didja see him?" shouted a Gryffindor girl. "Didja see him do it, you blasted badger?"

Cross was a popular Gryffindor boy in fourth year, Seeker for his House team, and though he was arrogant, and not above bullying younger students, no one in his House wanted to believe he was capable of such a thing.

But Dumbledore was peering intently into David Solomon's eyes, and the eleven-year-old met his gaze, irritable as it was, squarely. There was no deception in their depths. What the boy had said was the truth, Albus could spot a practiced liar from twenty feet away. Then too, the boy would have no need to lie to the Headmaster, three years difference in their ages ensured that there was no rivalry between the two boys, and they were in opposite Houses, and Hufflepuff was not known to have intense rivalries with any House, unlike Gryffindor and Slytherin.

"But you did not actually see Mr. Cross hexing Mr. Filch, David?" Dumbledore demanded.

"No, sir. But everyone knows Cross don't like Squibs. His dad works for Internal Magical Affairs, and he petitioned to pass the Anti-Squib Act. Have you heard of that, sir?"

Dumbledore nodded tightly, he had voted against passing that bill at the last Ministry gathering. "Indeed. It requires Squibs to register with the Ministry when they are of age, so the Ministry can keep track of them, and it limits the kind of employment they are able to hold, mostly restricted to menial labor, low paying jobs, and also restricts who they are allowed to marry, for Benjamin Cross believes that Squibs can pass on their non-magical genes like a disease. But he is wrong, there is no proof that a Squib parent will not have a perfectly healthy magical child, though most wizards would never consider marrying one for fear of being ostracized. That bill, thank Merlin, was vetoed. Squibs have enough to deal with without making prejudice legal." He spoke loud enough to be heard all throughout the hall, and then he laid a hand on David's shoulder and said, "Thank you for standing up for the truth, and for your fellow human being, Mr. Solomon."

The boy turned pink and did not say anything.

But Dumbledore was not through yet. "Does anyone here know the whereabouts of Mr. Cross? If you do, step forward." He scoured the hall with his steely gaze once again and several students flinched and backed away.

This was a side of their usually jolly Headmaster they never knew existed, and they were quite terrified.

Dumbledore waited patiently for someone else to speak, but then he called, "Mr. Cross, if you are here, step forward. It will go worse for you if you try and avoid me."

There was a flurry at the back of the room and a student yelled, "Quick, Shelby, through the fireplace!"

Someone pointed a wand and the fireplace erupted into large flames and a tall figure could be seen shoving his way through the knot of students, obviously intent on Flooing from the room.

Dumbledore spoke a single word and the flames died. Then he pointed his wand and cried, "Mr. Cross, come here at once!"

An invisible force picked up the struggling teen and levitated him through the air.

"No! Put me down, sir!" cried the Gryffindor Seeker, twisting desperately in the air. "I didn't do anything! That Hufflepuff little snot is lying!"

Dumbledore lowered the boy down in front of him, but did not release the spell that held Cross captive. "You have not been accused of anything by me, Mr. Cross. Yet. Why then did you try and run?"

"I didn't do anything!" Cross yelled, still fighting the spell. He was a handsome boy with a shock of golden hair and dreamy green eyes, he had several girls following him at any given time. Currently those

admirers were in a state of shock at seeing their idol caught in such a predicament.

"Then why were you attempting to leave the room, Shelby?" demanded the Headmaster sternly. "Those who are innocent have nothing to fear from my simple questions."

"I'm not afraid, sir!" denied the other vehemently. "That kid Solomon was trying to frame me."

"For what purpose?" queried Dumbledore softly.

"How the bloody hell should I know, sir! Because he's a rotten little prig!"

Albus's eyes narrowed. "We shall discuss this further in my office, Mr. Cross. Come along, Shelby." He placed a hand upon the young wizard's shoulder, and gestured with his other, making the apprentice glide along with him. Then he turned to the rest of the students in the hall. "You may go about your business as usual. If I find that Mr. Cross is not the culprit, you shall see him later on, and I will continue to search for the one who harmed Mr. Filch. This is one prank that shall not go unpunished."

Then the old wizard swept out of the hall, his robes billowing about him with a panache that Snape would have envied.

"Wow!" Harry whistled and turned to Holly. "Whatcha think, Holl? Is he the one?"

Holly frowned. "I don't know, Harry. He seems like the sort, y'know. Professor Dumbledore will find out, and then we'll see what happens."

"I wonder if they'll expel him?" Harry murmured. "I've never seen Professor Dumbledore get that mad at anybody. He was like scarier than Dad!"

"They ought to!" Holly said into his ear. Then she tugged her brother out of the hall and whispered, "Let's go back to Hagrid's. We need to finish grooming the unicorns."

"Right, and we need to tell Hagrid about what happened," Harry said, following her out the entrance doors.

Behind them, the Great Hall erupted into hushed whispers, rumors, speculation, and denial.

* * * * *

Once they had entered Dumbledore's inner office, he removed the spell binding Cross and said to the fourteen-year-old, "I must ask you to surrender your wand to me, Shelby. It must be examined."

Shelby glared at the elder wizard. "Give up my wand? No! I won't!" he clutched the ash wand tightly in his hand.

"Shelby, this is standard procedure in such a case. It will be returned to you if you are found to have not cast any harmful hexes or jinxes upon Mr. Filch."

Cross eyed Dumbledore suspiciously. The tall wizard met his gaze calmly, but there was a stern sense of purpose about him that caused the Gryffindor's bravado to quail. "Fine. Here. Now you can see that brat was lying."

Dumbledore tucked the wand into a pocket. "Have a seat, Shelby. I must discuss this matter with the other teachers. You are to remain here until called."

Shelby sank into a comfortable plush chair, gazing moodily at Fawkes the phoenix, who eyed him gravely from his perch. "What are you looking at, bird?" muttered Shelby crossly.

"Help yourself to a lemon drop as you wait." Dumbledore instructed, then he stepped out of the inner office and shut the door.

He quickly stoked the fire and began to Floo all the teachers in the school, telling them he must meet with them immediately for an emergency staff meeting. Even Poppy Pomfrey was not exempt, though he did apologize to her for taking her away from Argus. "How is he doing, Poppy?"

"Much better now that he's not hanging like a Christmas ham, Albus," she answered tartly.

"Forgive me for calling you, but you must be present as well for this meeting, Poppy. Can you get your assistant, Lucy Armand to watch the infirmary?"

Poppy nodded tiredly. Her assistant, a young seventh year named Lucy, was always willing to help her out with patients and such. "Yes, I shall call her and ask her to substitute for me until this meeting is over with. Argus is stable and sleeping right now. When he wakes he will probably wish to speak with you."

"Did he say anything about his attacker? Did he see who hexed him or tied him up there?"

Poppy shook her head. "No. He said it was from behind and he never got a clear view of the person's face. Though he did say the culprit had light colored hair, if that helps any."

"I see. Come as soon as you can, Poppy." Albus ordered, then withdrew from the fireplace to grab another pinch of Floo Powder and firecall the rest of his staff.

* * * * *

Severus had just entered the school, Narcissa and Draco in tow, when Minerva hailed him from across the entrance hall.

"Ah, Severus! There you are, I've been looking all over for you. There is an emergency staff meeting in the Headmaster's office," Minerva reported.

Severus took one look at the older witch, noting the way she was holding herself stiffly and her mouth was a single slash across her face, and knew something very wrong had happened in the half a day he'd been absent from the school. "What has happened?"

Minerva pursed her lips together. "I am not at liberty to discuss it with anyone but the staff for now," she indicated Narcissa and Draco with a jerk of her pointed chin.

"He is injured," Narcissa put in, frowning at her former professor.

"It's nothing." Severus waved off her comment. "I will take care of it later."

"How did you get hurt, Severus?" inquired the Transfiguration professor.

"I'm not at liberty to say at the moment," the Potions Master replied slyly.

Minerva gave him an arch glare, then looked at Narcissa and Draco and said, "Perhaps you will do me the courtesy of answering my question, Narcissa?"

"He was injured helping me, Minerva," said the other witch stiffly, she had never much cared for the Gryffindor matriarch.

"I see. Well, do you know the way to the guest wing, Narcissa?"

Narcissa nodded. "Yes, the west wing of the first floor, just above the entrance to the dungeon."

"Wait for me there," Severus instructed. "I shall be back shortly." He spun about and headed for the gargoyle that granted access to Dumbledore's office.

"Come along, Draco," he heard Narcissa say as he opened the secret passage to the Headmaster's office.

Minerva looked at him askance as the passage shut behind them and the stairs began to move. "What are Narcissa and Draco Malfoy doing here, Severus?"

"They are in hiding from Lucius. Narcissa wishes to file for divorce and she is afraid that Lucius will try and prevent her from ever seeing Draco again, so she asked me to assist her in taking her son from Malfoy Manor."

"Ah. I see, Lucius is going to be livid."

Severus nodded, a pleased smirk playing about his solemn features. "What catastrophe has occurred while I was gone, Minerva?"

"There was an . . . incident involving a student of my House, one with prejudice towards Squibs, and he-"

"Who was it? Did he hurt Holly?" Severus interrupted, his overprotective instincts kicking into overdrive. "Because I'm going to skin the little bastard if he's laid a finger on my daughter-!"

"Severus, calm down!" ordered McGonagall sharply. "Merlin, you're like a guard dog when it comes to defending that child."

"Was she hurt? Where is she?"

"She's with Harry and Hagrid, grooming and playing with the unicorn foals, I believe. But she was not the target of the student's cruel prank, that was poor Argus." Minerva informed him crisply.

"Argus? Not Holly?" he felt immense relief that his daughter was not harmed, followed by a sharp jab of shame, for Argus didn't deserve to be made sport of either by spoiled little troublemakers. "What did the boy do to him? Make him break out in a rash again? Lock him in the supply cupboard?"

"Worse. Much worse." Minerva said grimly, then she told him of how Harry and Holly had called Albus from his office and he had come down to find Filch suspended from the ceiling of the Great Hall, nearly

naked, wearing a mocking sign, and half-suffocated from hanging upside down for hours.

Snape's eyes narrowed. "That is far more serious than a schoolboy prank, Minerva. That is harassment and extreme prejudice and cruelty. Did Albus question the boy yet?"

"No, I think he wanted to discuss the incident with the rest of us and test Cross's wand first." The Head of Gryffindor House shook her head. "I'm mortified and shamed past bearing, Severus, that one of my House could behave in such a manner. It's a disgrace!"

The Potions Master nodded tightly. "As it would be for any of us. Prejudice of Squibs or Muggleborns or half-bloods knows no boundaries. It is everywhere."

It begins again. Just as it did when I attended Hogwarts, and the Marauders persecuted me for being a Slytherin and spread rumors that I was a practitioner of the Dark Arts as an excuse to torment me every chance they got. What they did to me was borderline harassment as well, though Albus never knew the half of it. And the last incident, with Lupin in the Shrieking Shack . . . that was the final straw. They should have been expelled, though Albus couldn't do that without revealing Remus. But he did put them on probation, and had them in detention for the rest of the year. Nothing like what they deserved, but . . . I just hope history doesn't repeat itself. The boy deserves to be made a good example of. Albus, you'd better take a stand this time . . . otherwise you've as good as ruined Holly's and Argus's chances for a normal life here, free of persecution, he thought grimly. For once, old man, act like a Headmaster and not a doting grandfather.

The two entered the office, and found Albus standing in front of his fireplace. All of the staff was assembled on the couches and chairs in front of the elderly sorcerer, awaiting his announcement. They all looked when Minerva and Snape came in.

"Late for a meeting, Snape?" drawled Throckmorton maliciously. "Tsk tsk."

Severus shot the Defense teacher a death glare, then walked over to an empty chair and seated himself in it. "My apologies, Albus. I was attending to a personal matter."

Albus waved off his apology. "Quite all right, Severus. Your time is your own on the weekends. I ought to apologize for ruining your Saturday. However, to business," the Headmaster lost the familiar twinkle in his eyes and became uncharacteristically stern. "I have called you all here to tell you of a grave breach of school rules by one of our students, Gryffindor Shelby Cross. This afternoon, it was brought to my attention by Severus's children that Argus Filch was hanging upside down from the ceiling of the Great Hall by both magical and Muggle means, nearly in the . . .altogether . . .wearing a sign proclaiming Come One, Come All and See the Stinking Buzzard!. The children tried to ask several students who had come into the hall for help in assisting Argus down, he was half unconscious from being hung upside down in that manner for hours, but they all laughed and refused to do anything. They then came and called me, and I helped Argus to the infirmary, where he is now being treated by Poppy." Here he turned to the medi-witch. "Poppy, please tell the staff the extent of Argus's injuries."

Madam Pomfrey did so, explaining that hanging upside down for that length of time, with most of his weight on his chest, almost caused Filch to suffocate, and she was currently treating him for shock and stress to several muscles in his shoulders and overall stress and trauma to his mind as well as his body.

"It was criminal, what was done to him," the medi-witch declared angrily. "Argus is not a young man, he's over fifty, and his heart . . .he's lucky he did not have a heart attack, trying to get himself down. And then to have students come in and laugh at him rather than try and help him down . . .that was no prank, Albus. It was a hate crime. We all know young Cross is prejudiced against Muggles, I've been treating Argus for various pranks he been the victim of ever since Cross set foot in this school. Simply disgraceful! You cannot permit this to go on, Albus. Next time the so-called "little joke" could kill. I vote for expulsion."

There were murmurs throughout the room, and then Throckmorton cleared his throat. "Forgive me, Madam, but is that judgment a bit . . .harsh? We do not even know if the boy committed the offence."

"Ah, but I do, Victor," Dumbledore put in heavily. "I have tested his wand with a Reverse Magic Charm and have seen that he did indeed cast the spell to adhere Argus to the ceiling and then he left him there. If you wish, I shall show you." Albus picked up Cross's wand and spoke the words, "Prio*ri* Incantatem!" A white mist shot out of the wand and showed Filch being floated into the air and stuck to the ceiling, hanging helplessly some forty feet in the air, robbed of dignity and nearly his life as well.

Throckmorton frowned. "So he cast the spell. But this is a first offence, surely expulsion is harsh."

Poppy gave the new professor a sharp look. "Victor, since you are new here, perhaps you don't understand the seriousness of this offence. You say the boy was merely playing a prank, but that so-called prank could have seriously harmed Mr. Filch. What will happen next time, if we permit him to get off? Next time we may well have a funeral. Is it your policy to wait until someone dies until you act?"

Throckmorton scowled at the witch. "I resent that, madam!"

"That is your prerogative, sir." She turned to look at the Headmaster. "You have heard my diagnosis and I have given you my vote, should it come down to it. May I return to the infirmary to check up on my patients?"

"Yes, of course. And thank you, Poppy."

Pomfrey rose and departed the office using the Floo Network.

"I second her motion," Severus put in after Poppy had departed.

"You would, considering how you have lowered yourself to raise one," sneered Throckmorton.

Severus forced himself to remain in his chair, his hands clenched so tightly over his armrests that the knuckles showed white. "Unlike you, Throckmorton, I am voting for expulsion because the boy is guilty of harming another without provocation, and should be punished for his misdeed. The one has nothing to do with the fact that Holly is my daughter." If I were five years younger, Throckmorton, I would call you outside and teach you a good lesson in manners, you arrogant toerag!

Throckmorton snorted, but subsided at a warning glance from Albus. "Gentlemen, please. Before we vote on how Mr. Cross is to be punished, I suggest we bring him in here and question him, so that we may see beyond the shadow of a doubt what his motives were in committing this misdeed."

"Yes, Albus. Let us see what Cross has to say for himself," Flitwick agreed. "He might have not meant true harm to Argus at all."

Severus rolled his eyes. Filius, your naeivity is astounding. The boy cast those hexes with the intent to harm, it was no innocent prank! And what's more, he left the man there for hours. A prank would have been dangling him upside down in front of his friends for a brief time for a laugh, not that, the Potions Master thought bitterly, recalling the awful days of his youth when Potter and Black had done just that to him in front of a crowd of students. Agonizingly humiliating as that had been, Severus had not been physically harmed by it, and while it was cruel, it had not crossed the line. What had been done to Filch did.

Albus returned momentarily with Cross, who slouched insolently into the room, the picture of a teenager who had never been made to own up to his actions. Severus fixed the miscreant with one of his famous glowers and had the satisfaction of seeing the Seeker cringe slightly.

But then Cross's gaze alighted on Madam Hooch, who was the Quidditch coach, and he said, "Hey Coach, I missed practice today because of this little prat accusing me of casting hexes on Filch."

But Madam Hooch, who normally favored her flyers, was not amused at the boy's casual insolence. "You shall have a lot more to worry about, Cross, than a missed practice."

"Huh? Why?" the boy blustered.

"Because your wand did indeed cast the spell that hexed Mr. Filch, young man," Minerva snapped, coming to stand before him, her hands on her hips.

Cross went pale. "No . . .that's wrong . . ."

"Lying will not help you, Mr. Cross," said the Gryffindor matron. "We all know you cast that hex and did this shameful thing to Mr. Filch. What I want to know now is why?"

Cross stared about at the silent disapproving faces of the faculty and swallowed hard. It was then that he began to realize that no one was going to chalk this up to a youthful prank and let it go. Momentary panic showed in his eyes, then he took a deep breath and said, "It was an assignment, Professor."

Minerva's eyes narrowed. "An assignment, Mr. Cross? What do you mean? No teacher would ever tell a student to hex a defenseless person."

"Lying again, Cross?" Severus growled.

"No, sir!" Cross jumped at hearing the threat in the Potion Master's voice. Then he gathered his courage and pointed directly at Throckmorton. "He told me to do it, Professor Snape."

There was dead silence in the room. Until Throckmorton snarled, "You little brat, how dare you accuse me of such a thing?"

But Cross did not back away, even though his insides had turned to jelly. "Because it's the truth. You told us to practice the spells you showed us for homework, sir. Find someone who doesn't matter and see what you can do, that's what you told us. So I was walking around, trying to think of someone who nobody really gave a damn

about, and then I saw Filch sweeping the front entrance. And I thought, well, he's nothing but a Squib, and they're all good for nothing 'cept to clean and whatnot. So I drew my wand and I cast the Levicorpus spell on him and then, well, he was thrashing about and spitting swear words at me, and I thought he needed to be taught a lesson in talking to his betters, like Dad always says, so I brought him into the Great Hall, and I vanished all his clothes and he called me some more names, and I made a sign and hung it around his neck, it was funny, he got all red and his eyes were about to fall out of his head. I thought, why not hang him up so everyone can see? So I stuck him to the ceiling with a Sticking Charm, but just in case that wasn't enough, I tied him as well with a pair of red suspenders. Then I went to find my mates and show them."

"And why did it take you so long to return, Mr. Cross?" demanded McGonagall.

He shrugged. "Got involved with some chicks and stuff. But what's the big deal? It wasn't like I used an Unforgivable on the old bugger. He's still breathing, ain't he? And Professor Throckmorton told me to." Cross whined.

"That's a lie! I said no such thing!" thundered Throckmorton.

"Victor, quiet!" Albus ordered in a steely tone few had ever heard him use before. He turned to gaze at Cross, looking very much like a reluctant parent forced to punish a beloved child harshly. "Mr. Cross, do you understand that what you did was wrong? You should never raise your wand to harm another person, be they wizard or Muggle, here or elsewhere, unless you are in fear of your life. Your magic is not to be used to harm or humiliate another person. Using it in such a manner constitutes a display of dark magic, whether or not you use an Unforgivable Curse."

"B-but sir, it wasn't my fault!" Cross whined. "Throckmorton told me to!"

"That is the very thing several witches and wizards said when they were brought before the Wizengamot for being followers of You-Know-Who," Albus said sharply. "They claimed they were forced into

those acts, where they tortured Muggles and Muggleborns and whoever else they felt like. They claimed the Imperius was cast upon them, or that they feared for their lives if they did not do as You-Know-Who ordered. Are you claiming that Professor Throckmorton cast an Imperius upon you? That he compelled you to hurt Mr. Filch with magic?"

"No . . .but he's just a Squib. So what if he got a little shaken up? He's a nasty old bugger, always threatening us kids if we're caught out of bed, always sneaking 'round and spying us, him and that old horror of a cat! He should have retired years ago, it isn't like he contributes anything useful to the school. I . . .I didn't really mean to scare him that bad, sir. I'll tell him so, all right?"

"You will need far more than a mere apology to rectify this situation, Cross," interjected Severus, pinning the boy with his raptor gaze. "Your so-called "assignment" nearly resulted in Mr. Filch's death." There, no more pussyfooting around here, let the boy hear it straight that his stupid ill-considered spell could have killed Filch. "What do you say to that, boy? If Mr. Filch had died as a result of your spell, would you then say, oh but I didn't mean to, sir!" sneered the Potions Master. "Or that you were just following orders, hmm? That is no excuse for your actions, Cross! You supposedly have a brain, why did you not use it for something besides catching a Snitch? Why did you not say to yourself, I should not be casting such spells and think before you acted? Can you answer that?"

Cross did not reply, but the back of his neck was very red and he blushed hotly under the heat of Snape's censorious gaze as well as the stinging comments the professor had just delivered. "I didn't know, sir!" he whined, sounding like a four-year-old. He threw a pleading glance at McGonagall. "But he's not dead, so what's all the fuss? Okay, I made a mistake, I'm sorry. Now can you just give me detention, Professor, and let me go back to my room or whatever?"

McGonagall shook her head. "Detention? Mr. Cross, do you not realize that what you have done has gone far beyond a mere detention, or even several detentions? You have committed a serious crime here, one that may result in expulsion!"

"What? No . . .no, you wouldn't! It was a joke . . .you can't expel me over that!" babbled Cross, understanding finally dawning in his eyes.

"We can . . .and we may yet . . .unless you show some indication of remorse." McGonagall said icily.

"I said I was sorry!" Cross cried. "What else do you want?"

"For you to mean it, young man," Albus said sharply. "The words are meaningless unless you truly feel remorseful. And it's becoming clearer to me that you do not. You feel sorry that you were discovered, you tried to cover up your actions this afternoon instead of owning up to them, and when you were given a chance to accept responsibility for what you yourself had done, you tried to shift the blame to another. That speaks of a dishonest heart, Mr. Cross, and your attitude towards Squibs is not one that I will tolerate any longer in my school. Do you understand me?"

Cross swallowed, sweating. Then suddenly he snarled, "No, old man, I don't! Everyone knows Squibs are rejects, that they're lower even than Muggles, fit only for washing floors and tending gardens, they're lazy and stupid, and they need to be taught their place. There's purebloods, half-bloods, Mudbloods, Muggles, and Squibs. It's always been that way, why can't you get that? Who gives a bloody damn about Squibs? They all ought to be drowned at birth, like an unwanted litter of kittens. They're an inconvenience." He gestured angrily at Throckmorton. "What's wrong with you people that you don't get it? Throckmorton knows what's up, but the rest of you have gone barmy, defending some dried-up Squib. I can't believe you'd expel me over that! I want to call my father. He won't let you do that to me!"

Albus's brows lowered. "Your father has no authority here, Mr. Cross. I ask again, do you not regret your actions, child? If so, you must make reparation to Mr. Filch, perhaps serve as his assistant around the school. You are young, it is not too late for you to change, Shelby."

"Me? Serve that old prig? No way! I'm no house elf. I want to speak to my father."

"He cannot save you, young man." Albus intoned fiercely. "So be it. Upon your own head rests your decision. We shall put it to a vote now, and if the majority goes against you, you shall be expelled."

When Cross opened his mouth to protest, Minerva pointed her wand and intoned, "Silencio! Enough, Cross! The Headmaster has decreed what will be, and your father cannot get you off the hook this time, even if he is a Ministry advisor. Now be still!"

Albus turned to the assembled wizards and witches. "We already have Professor Snape and Madam Pomfrey's vote for expulsion. How say the rest of you? All in favor of expulsion, raise your right hand and say "Aye"."

Over half of the staff raised their hands and yelled, "Aye!"

Including Minerva.

Only Throckmorton refused to commit himself, abstaining.

"It is done. You are to be expelled, Mr. Cross." Dumbledore said, fixing the gaping boy with a stern yet regretful expression. "Tomorrow morning, you shall be brought before the school and your wand shall be snapped and you shall be cast from the school. I shall inform your father myself and you can ride the train back home. Have you anything else to say?" he asked, removing the Silencing Charm.

"Hypocrite!" shrieked Cross. "This is all your fault, Throckmorton, you bloody coward! Why don't you admit it, huh?"

Throckmorton snorted and looked right through Cross as if he didn't exist.

"Cross, come to order and act like a Gryffindor!" McGonagall ordered sharply.

"All of you can go to hell! You ain't expelling me over no damn Squib!"

Then Cross was lunging for his wand, his reflexes honed to a hairsbreadth from his playing Seeker for three years.

His fingers closed over the wand before the teachers could react.

He jerked up and spun, trying to maneuver himself around Dumbledore and dash out the door.

"Stupefy!"

A red light shot out of Snape's wand and hurtled into the boy.

Cross crumpled to the floor, his attempted escape thwarted by Severus's ever-alert reflexes.

"Thank you, Severus," Albus said, bending down to remove Cross's wand from his grip. "Minerva, I suggest you keep him under watch until tomorrow morning."

"I shall, Headmaster. I am terribly sorry for all this."

The old wizard patted her shoulder comfortingly. "Do not blame yourself, Min. We all make choices." He then directed his flinty gaze towards the Defense professor. "Is that not so, Victor?"

"What do you mean?"

"I am referring to Cross naming you as an accomplice, or at the very least encouraging him to harm Filch."

"Sir, I told you, the boy was lying! I never told him to harm Filch. I said to my students, 'Find an appropriate target to practice on.' Not once did I encourage the sly sneak to attack Filch. He was trying to save his own neck by accusing me, Headmaster."

Dumbledore gave the other man one of his piercing glares and shook his head. He could not pinpoint what bothered him so about the other man, but he found he did not trust the other wizard. And it was not solely due to Throckmorton's attitude towards Squibs. No, there was something else that made him uneasy.

Severus too glared at the Defense professor. He was behind this, or else I'm no spy. Only he covered his tracks too well. We could never prove it, unless we gave him Veritaserum, and we don't have a valid claim to do so. The bloody redcap walks for now. Until I can catch him in the act.

"Very well, Victor. I cannot accuse without proof. But know this, I shall be watching you, and if you step across the line once more, you shall be dismissed."

"Understood, sir."

"Good. You may all go. This meeting is adjourned."

The professors rose and departed the office, Minerva first conjuring a stretcher to put the unconscious Cross on before leaving. She walked slowly, her proud shoulders bowed, looking every one of her sixty-five years. Clearly her student's betrayal had cut her deeply.

Albus shook his head sadly. "Poor Minerva," he said to Severus, who alone had remained behind. "She takes it personally when one of her House comes up wanting."

"Indeed. As do I," Severus remarked. "But there was no choice. An example had to be made, Albus. Better now than later. Perhaps it will serve as a deterrent for future students."

"I certainly hope so. I have not expelled a student in over fifty years, not since Hagrid."

Severus's eyebrows rose. "You expelled . . .but you were not Headmaster at the time. That was Dippet."

"I know. But I requested to be the one who broke his wand. Because at the time, I did not consider him guilty, and we were not permitted to vote on expulsion. That was the Headmaster's decision alone. Dippet believed Hagrid's pet Aragog was guilty of killing Myrtle and so he was expelled for harboring a dangerous creature and endangering

the welfare of his fellow students. But I never agreed with the ruling, and when the time came to expel him, I volunteered to do it."

"So you could save a piece of his wand, old fox?" Severus guessed shrewdly.

Dumbledore smiled serenely. "Would I do that, Severus?"

"If you thought it were necessary, you would. We both know that umbrella of Hagrid's is used for more than keeping off rain."

The Headmaster did not answer. "There was another reason why I volunteered to perform the breaking ceremony. Back then, it was customary to drive the student from the school with whips, and I refused to hurt the boy any more than necessary, he was already shamed enough by having his wand destroyed. I made believe I flogged him with Glamour Charms and Dippet was fooled. Once I became Headmaster, I did what I could to make reparation for my part in destroying a promising young wizard's career."

Severus nodded. "But this time it is different. The culprit deserves to be expelled, Albus. Though he should be joined by another, and you and I both know it."

"Yes, I know. But we have no proof, Severus." Albus's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "Would you be willing to do a small service for me? Be my eyes and ears again this once, old friend. Find out what drives Throckmorton and if you can, give me proof that he is guilty in rousing hatred of Squibs in the students. Then I can sack him with a clear conscience."

Severus smiled eagerly. "Now that is one assignment I will take gladly, Albus. I have long suspected him of being in league with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named."

Albus nodded darkly. "As have I. Hunt well, my falcon." He clasped Severus's shoulder lightly. He was one of the few adult males the Potions Master permitted such familiarity. After enduring years of abuse at the hands of his father, Severus shied away from most

physical contact, save for that from close friends and his children.
"Was there something else you wished to discuss, my boy?"

"Yes. I have brought Narcissa and Draco Malfoy to Hogwarts and offered them sanctuary." Severus revealed his true reason for lingering at last.

"Oh? For what reason?"

"Lucius," was all Snape said, but it was enough.

Dumbledore nodded. "I hope they find their stay here a pleasant one. I think it will do good for Draco to mingle with other children, one child in particular."

"I agree." Severus concurred, then said, "I must be going. I shall keep watch. Good afternoon, Albus."

"Good afternoon, Severus. Keep watch and keep safe," he murmured as the black cloaked wizard strode away. "I cannot afford to lose any more sons," he said in a bare whisper, so faint that only Fawkes caught it.

Shaking his head, he returned to his desk and began to compose a letter to Mr. Cross.

To Mr. Benjamin Cross, Esquire:

It is with deepest regrets that I write to inform you that your son, Shelby . . .

So, what did you think of Dumbledore here? And the others?

Don't worry, Throckmorton will get his eventually!

Next: The long awaited meeting between Draco and his half-sister, Holly! Predictions, anyone???

Meetings

Narcissa examined the guest quarters Severus had shown them to with a rather critical eye, but she could find no fault with them. The furniture was well polished and free of dust and of good quality, such as she had had in her own home. The rooms were a suite containing a sitting area with a huge fireplace, plush couch done in a soft cream and powder blue stripe with plenty of plump throw pillows, the walls decorated with lively tapestries of a spring revel, an English garden, and children playing with a dog and riding horses. The mantle sported a fine mahogany clock and a framed needlepoint of all four house crests as well as a pretty crystal unicorn.

There was also a divan upholstered in the same pattern as the couch and fine endtables and one long one set with a vase of fresh flowers and a lace table runner. There was a thick area rug in cream and blue over the floor and the room was lit with several hanging spelled globes. They went on automatically when a person entered a room and would dim on command so someone could sleep if they wished.

A quick inspection of the two bedrooms and the bath revealed the same tasteful décor. There was even a small pantry stocked with snack foods, tea, and coffee as well as mugs, plates, and utensils. Just in case the guests wished to make themselves something to eat before the main meals in the hall, and did not wish to summon a house elf, the witch mused.

She found she was rather hungry after infiltrating her former home, and she helped herself to a tin of water crackers and some cheese spread that was in a separate cold-spelled portion of the pantry.

Taking the snack into the sitting room along with a bottle of Selina's Springwater, Narcissa settled down on the couch to relax. She could hear Draco putting his things away in the room just down the hall and smiled. At least her son would be safe for a time, and more importantly, away from his father's influence. Lucius had been a decent father to Draco, most days. He had been quite pleased that she had borne him a son, someone to carry the Malfoy name. But he had wanted more children to shore up his legacy and Narcissa had failed, through no fault of her own, in that department. Perhaps that

was what had compelled her husband to seek another woman. Or perhaps he had just gotten bored, like so many of his class did, and sought out variety. Narcissa frowned, and resolved not to dwell on whatever reasons Lucius might have had for breaking his marriage vows.

At least now she need not fear Draco being influenced by Lucius's selfish ways any longer, nor tempting her son to walk the path of darkness. He had already started his son down the dark road by encouraging intolerance towards those Lucius felt were beneath him, such as Muggleborns and blood traitors and Squibs. He used to make Draco recite the ranks of wizarding society, and of course those three were at the bottom, half-bloods ranked in the middle and the purebloods, like the Blacks and Malfoys were the pinnacle.

That innate prejudice had been in her own family too, but only Bellatrix had ever really bought into her grandmother Irma's policy that purebloods were royalty. Cygnus Black had been a quiet man, content to live the life of a wizarding gentlemen and he had never encouraged the rabid prejudice the elder generation had. Of course, he was terrified of Grandmother Irma, after she disowned his brother, he wouldn't have dared to say boo to her. And Aunt Walburga was just as bad, always on us to behave like proper ladies of rank and not disgrace the family by making an improper match. Well, Aunt, I made your so-called proper match and put myself in a gilded cage in hell for ten years. Perhaps I should have followed Dromeda's example and run away with a Muggle too.

She bit her lip, recalling her fun-loving wild older sister, always in one scrape or another, yet unafraid to stand up for what she thought was right. Nothing had ever scared Andromeda. Narcissa, the baby of her family, had always adored and admired sassy Dromeda, and wished she were more like her. But she had been the quiet one, a survival tactic when you lived with the overbearing temperamental Bellatrix, and after Dromeda had left she had been careful to keep her head down and not draw attention to herself.

Until Lucius started courting me, and I thought he was a fairy tale prince. Silly lonely girl that I was, if I had known then what I do

now . . .perhaps I'd have found the courage to ask someone else out. Ah, well, what's done is done, and I can only look forward now.

"Mother, I'm finished unpacking," Draco's voice interrupted her reverie, and she blinked and looked at her son.

"Would you like something to eat? There's food in the small pantry." She waved her hand at the remains of cheese and crackers on the plate before her.

Draco considered. "Yes, I could eat a bit." He looked uneasily at his mother. "Am I allowed to use magic here, Mother?"

"You are. But a practice wand only."

"Right." He pulled out the spare one he had always used at home and chanted a Summoning Charm. Soon a plate of port wine cheese and crackers floated over to him as did a glass of butterbeer. "This place isn't half bad," he said sitting next to his mother. He ate a few crackers before he asked softly, "Do you think Father will look for us. Me, rather?"

"Yes. Whether or not he will find us is another story. Severus has assured me that Hogwarts is a sanctuary for us, as it is for everyone who comes here, including your half-sister."

"That's good, I guess." He still had mixed feelings about his sister and his father, everything had happened so quickly, he hadn't really had time to think about it. Now that he did, however, he realized he felt odd having a younger sibling, much less one who was . . .a Squib. "I wonder what she's like? My sister. It must horrible, to not have magic."

"She has magic, Draco," Narcissa corrected. "Just a small amount of it. From what Severus told me, your sister has a powerful gift of Sight. She can see in fire, I think. But otherwise, she can't cast spells. Ironic, isn't it? One single gift. Must have given your father fits."

"Definitely. You know what a perfectionist he is."

"Not quite as perfect as he seemed," Narcissa remarked tartly. "I do hope you remember that, son, and try to behave cordially towards your little sister. I know it may be a bit confusing, but she is your blood, and you should be happy you have a sibling, Draco."

"Even if she's a Squib?"

"Yes. I loved my sisters, especially your Aunt Andromeda."

"That's the one Father said was disowned and we shouldn't speak about."

"Humph! Now I'm a grown woman, I shall speak of her if I please. Your aunt was a wonderful person, her only crime, if you can call it that, was to marry for love and an unsuitable man besides. But though it cost her, I think she is happier now than either of the rest of us, who married as we were bid. Sometimes, Draco, you have to ignore tradition and follow your heart. Dromeda always used to tell me that." Narcissa smiled reminiscently. "Oh, the talks we used to have! I missed her something awful when she left."

"Yeah, and you were stuck with crabby nasty Aunt Bella," her son remarked. He had never cared much for Bellatrix, he had seen her once, when he was three, and she had terrified him. "She slapped me a good one for playing in dirt like a common Muggle."

Narcissa's eyes flashed. "I remember. That's why I forbid her to ever come to the house again. Bella was my grandmother Irma in miniature, sour and arrogant and filled with anger, never satisfied. It's not surprising she became a follower of You-Know-Who."

"So you had Aunt Bella the tyrant, Aunt Dromeda the rebel, and you, Mother. What were you like as a child?"

"I was quiet, mostly. And usually obedient. I had to be, or else Bella would tell on me. Either that or punish me herself. My sister always thought she was right and her way was the only way."

"Sounds like Father."

Narcissa nodded. 'Tis a pity they didn't marry each other. Then they could have been perfect purebloods together. "I know it can be hard, trying to meet your family's expectations. And perhaps I'm a poor example of this son, since I followed the path mapped out for me by mine, but I want you to think about what the Malfoy name stands for. It's a proud name and once it was an honorable one as well, until several members, your father included, decided to follow the dark path. Pride and prejudice, that describes the Malfoys exactly. And some of the Blacks as well."

"Is that why you're divorcing Father?"

"Partly. I have no desire to follow him down that road again, as I did during the early years of our marriage." She looked at her son earnestly. "Draco, our marriage hasn't been . . . good for a number of years. Only I tried to ignore until I discovered your father's . . . indiscretion and the product of it. Then I finally acted, and I don't regret it. What I do regret is making you unhappy, and taking you away from everything you once knew. But . . . this was the only way. Lucius will never change, at least not in the way that I wish, and I didn't want you to become what he was."

"I know." Draco covered his mother's hand with his own. "I'm sorry you were unhappy, Mother. I don't . . . don't want to be like him either, anymore. Once I did, but . . . not now. He showed me some curses and I . . . didn't like the way they made me feel when I cast one. I felt dirty, like something rancid had crawled inside me and infected me. I don't want to follow the Dark Lord. But I was afraid to tell Father."

Narcissa put her arm about her son and hugged him. "Oh, Draco. You don't ever have to be afraid again. You're safe here. And maybe this time, we can have a different life. At least, I hope so."

"Me too." Draco said honestly, but he was still unsure about his new sibling. He could not help feeling superior to her and even a little resentful, for his father must have cared somewhat for her before he realized what she was. And in a way, she was to blame for upsetting his world. If not for her, his parents would still be together and it would be life as usual. But then he would still be afraid of Lucius discovering his only son was not a follower of darkness. Perhaps this

way was better. He ate another cheese-spread cracker, trying to come to terms with his confusion.

* * * * *

After the staff meeting had finished, Severus went down to his lab to finish tending the nasty bite he had gotten from the skeletal wyvern. Once he had cleaned the gash out properly and spread murtlap essence salve on it and re-bandaged it, he went to see where his children were.

But upon checking the corral with the unicorns, he found that Harry and Holly were absent, and so was Silver. "Hagrid, a moment, if you would," he called out to the gamekeeper, who was returning from the forest with some meadowsweet and a brace of rabbits. "Do you know where my children are? Minerva said they were here, but I don't see any sign of them."

"Hello, Professor! Yeah, they were here, helpin' me brush down the foals, but then Holly said she wanted to see how Argus was doin' and they went over t'the Hospital Wing. You just missed 'em."

"Oh. Thank you, Hagrid." Relieved that they weren't roaming about getting into mischief, Severus turned and headed back to the castle.

He lingered just inside the door of the infirmary, watching his two children speak to Filch, who looked dreadfully pale and ill, even though he had potions from Poppy to help his breathing and strained muscles in his shoulders, upper back and arms. Next to the two Snapes was Silver, sitting alertly.

Though Snape made no sound, Silver turned his head slightly and flicked an ear back towards the silent Potions Master. Amber eyes met dark, and Severus shook his head slightly. He wished to observe the children unnoticed for a moment more. Silver twitched an ear lazily in reply, then turned back around to face Filch.

"Here, Mr. Filch. These are for you," Holly held out a small bouquet of wildflowers.

"Flowers?" the old steward seemed astonished. "Fer me? Been years since a pretty girl's given me flowers."

Holly giggled at Filch's speech and looked at Harry. "Harry, we need a vase to put the flowers in, only I haven't got one."

"Uhh . . .maybe we can ask Madam Pomfrey?"

Severus pointed his wand and silently intoned a Summoning charm.

An instant later a small glass vase half-filled with water soared over to the table.

Holly's eyes grew round. "Hey, did you do that, Harry?"

"No. I don't know how. Neat!"

"How'd it get here, then?"

"Maybe the castle supplied it." Filch offered. "Its magic reacts like that sometimes."

"Okay." Holly carefully placed the flowers inside the vase. "There! My mum always said that flowers made her feel better. We used to pick lots of them and put them all over our flat."

"And this is for you too, Mr. Filch," Harry said, and handed Filch three boxes of chocolate frogs. "Candy always makes me feel better."

Filch hesitated before taking the sweets, surprised that any child would ever give him a get well present.

Harry, misunderstanding him, said quickly, "They're not magicked or nothin', they're just chocolate. I'd never pull pranks on you like the students do, Mr. Filch. Dad would strip the hide off me."

"Aye, he would that. Thank you, Harry." Filch said gruffly, taking the chocolate frogs and putting them next to the flowers. One hand caressed the sleeping Mrs. Norris, who was curled up in his lap. "They'll be a nice treat after all those terrible potions I have to take."

The kids made a face at that in sympathy and the steward chuckled softly.

"I hope you get better soon," Holly said softly. "Professor Dumbledore caught the bad kid that did that to you."

"He did?"

"Yup and he looked mad enough to kick his arse all the way to China," Harry informed him.

"Good. 'Bout time Albus got riled up about this," Filch said grimly. "This kind of thing's been goin' on too long."

"Y'mean, they've done things like this to you before?" Holly gasped.

"No, lass. Not this bad, but they've played stupid pranks on me with dungbombs and hexed sweets and other rotten jokes. But nobody ever thought to do anything about it, figgered they'd grow out of it, I guess." Filch coughed into a handkerchief for a minute, then wiped his mouth and continued. "But see, they forget, that prejudice ain't something that you grow out of. It just gets worse as you get older. You just find different ways t' express it instead of pranks. Like the Anti-Squib bill."

"Why do they hate us so much?" Holly asked then, her sapphire eyes glinting with puzzled anger. "What did we ever do to them?"

"Nothing. 'Cept not be born like they are," Filch said heavily. "Lass, I've been bearing the curse of being different for over forty years, and I never figgered out an answer to that question. I guess they fear the different or are afraid that it could have been them, but for a twist of fate. Or maybe because it reminds them that wizards and Muggles aren't all that different after all, and that's not something they want to think about. Whatever the reason is, lass, y'keep your family and friends close. They'll help you when nobody else will. That was always my problem, see? I never had family to help me, I was alone, all except for Norrie here. Albus tried, but he couldn't be everywhere, an' he had more to worry about than me. An' he always had a soft

spot for troublemaking kids. Humph! They all need a good wallop. That's the problem with kids these days. No discipline." He coughed again, then added, "You an' your brother are two of the few kids I've ever known that have manners and respect. You ought to thank your dad for that. He raised you right." He pointed to Silver. "Keep that great dog of yours by you, an' if anybody threatens you, let him go for 'em."

"But Mr. Filch, if Silver bit anyone, he'd be in terrible trouble!" Holly objected. "They could destroy him for hurting a person."

"Not if he was protecting you," Filch disagreed. "Y'do as I say, missy. These be dangerous times and you could get hurt bad by people like whoever did this to me. It's nearly as bad as when You-Know-Who was around. If this could happen to me . . . Holly, you watch your back. Be smart and don't go anywhere without your dad or your brother or your dog. Alone, you're an easy mark. Understand?"

There was desperation mingled with concern in his tone, and the agitation brought on a vicious spate of coughing. He coughed so loudly that it brought Poppy from the dispensary .

"Argus? Calm now. Breathe." She ordered, waving her wand at him. "I warned you not to get overexcited."

Filch gasped, his eyes streaming, but he finally ceased coughing and sat up, wiping his face with a clean handkerchief Poppy handed him. "I'm fine. No need to fuss."

Poppy snorted. "Fine is it? Not by my lights. You need rest, not gabbing with these two young ones here." She turned to Harry and Holly. "You mustn't get him excited, children. It's not good for him."

"I'm not on my deathbed, Poppy," grumbled Filch. "So don't go puttin' me there afore time, woman."

"We're sorry," Harry apologized.

"Yes, well, no harm done. But best you be going, he needs his rest," Poppy said, then looked up and saw Severus standing there. "Look, here's your father, come to fetch you for supper, I'd wager."

The two children turned and ran to Snape with smiles on their faces. They both hugged him, then Harry blurted, "Dad, you'll never guess what happened while you were gone. Some mean kid pranked Mr. Filch and hung him upside down in the Great Hall, but we found him and got Professor Dumbledore to let him down and he was so mad, Dad, it was like . . .like the wrath of Merlin!"

"I can imagine," Severus said, a smirk stealing over his face at Harry's description.

"But he caught who did it and I hope they expel him!" Holly said, her eyes flashing. "They hurt Mr. Filch awful bad, Severus."

Severus touched her cheek lightly. "I know, little one. And he will be expelled. I have Professor Dumbledore's word on it."

"They voted in favor of expulsion, Severus?" Poppy asked, a pleased light in her eyes.

"Yes."

"Good. Past time the young troublemakers around here were called to account for their misdeeds. Should have done something about them long ago, would have saved me a good deal of patching up on you especially, Severus. For once Albus made the punishment fit the crime."

She gave a self-satisfied sniff, then turned back to her patient. "Now, what would you like for supper, Argus?"

"Come, children. As Madam Pomfrey said, it is time for supper," Severus gently shooed them out the door and Silver rose and followed.

"Dad, what did Madam Pomfrey mean back there?" Harry queried a moment later. "About patching you up too? Were you . . . did kids pick on you too when you were in school?"

Blast, I was hoping he wouldn't have caught that, Severus thought. He really disliked discussing his past schooldays with people, but he knew Harry would just keep asking until he gave him an answer, the boy was as persistent as a tick on a dog. He cleared his throat and said, "Yes, for awhile, I was a victim of bullies like Mr. Filch was." One of the worst being your father, and his best friend Black. Severus thought darkly, but he wasn't up to discussing that with Harry at the moment. "Until I learned to fight back, that is. But that's long ago. Right now, I have some guests that I'd like you to meet."

"Who?" asked Holly.

Severus halted and laid a hand on her shoulder. "Your half-brother, Draco, and his mother, Narcissa. I have brought them here and they would like to speak with you. However, I would like to remove the glamour over you for awhile, so they could see your true appearance. I can recast it afterwards. Would you be willing to do that, Holly?"

Holly hesitated. Then, slowly, she nodded. Severus waved a hand over her and her face and hair once more resembled her father's.

"All right. Follow me."

Then he led them down the corridor to the guest room where the Malfoys were staying.

* * * * *

When the knock came upon the door of their suite, Narcissa turned to Draco and said, "That will be Severus and his family. Draco, remember, be polite and do not disgrace me."

The blond rolled his eyes. "Merlin, Mother, I'm not five, remember? I know how to be polite. It's not like I'm going to hex the girl or anything."

"Nevertheless . . . Come in!" she called, and the door swung open to admit Severus, the children, and Silver.

Narcissa's first thought when she caught sight of Holly huddling next to Severus and slightly behind Harry was that she was a miniature Lucius in female form. Until she took another look and saw that the child's eyes were a brilliant sapphire, a deep blue totally unlike her husband's, and filled with anxiety. Why, the girl's nervous! About meeting us. Narcissa thought in astonishment.

"Hello, Severus. I'm glad you could join us for supper," Narcissa said cordially, her schooling in being a perfect hostess coming to the fore. "Please, come in."

"Hello, Narcissa and Draco." Severus said, walking into the guest quarters. "I would be pleased to accept your invitation. I fear the Great hall will be in an uproar after today's events. But more about that later. Narcissa, may I introduce my children? This is Harry." He gave Harry a slight nudge in the back, to remind of him of his manners.

Harry stepped forward then, and held out his hand. "How do you do, Mrs. Malfoy?"

Narcissa took his hand and shook it firmly. "Very well, thank you. Harry, this is my son, Draco. I believe you are the same age?"

"Yes, ma'am." Harry said, then eyed the other boy warily. "Hello, I'm Harry."

Draco took Harry's hand and shook it quickly. "I'm Draco. Welcome to my . . . uh . . . home." He said awkwardly, because he didn't know just what to call the guest quarters. Then he looked at Holly, waiting for her to be introduced to him.

"And this is my daughter, Holly," Severus said then, and put a hand on the girl's shoulder in silent encouragement.

Holly took a deep breath and stepped forward and said in a quiet yet firm tone, "Hello, Mrs. Malfoy. I'm Holly Sinclair, pleased to meet

you." She shook Narcissa's hand automatically, but her eyes were glued to Draco. Merlin, but he looks like my fa-Lucius. So very like him, it's positively eerie. But then . . .so do I.

"Welcome, Holly," said Narcissa, and she gave the girl a smile. "Draco, say hello to your . . .sister."

Frost blue eyes met sapphire. For one moment neither one said anything. But both were thinking similar thoughts. She looks almost like me. Merlin, but this is weird. Narcissa cleared her throat sharply, and then Draco stepped forward and held out his hand. "Hello, Holly. No mistaking you for anybody but a Malfoy, I guess. Pleased to meet you."

"No, Draco." She took her brother's hand tentatively. "Pleased to meet you too."

There was a rather awkward silence, which was broken by Harry, who felt suddenly possessive and protective of Holly, saying, "She's a Malfoy by blood, but she's also a Snape." And he gave Draco a warning look.

Draco met his eyes and nodded. "Nothing wrong with that."

"Why don't we all come in and have a seat in the sitting room. I'll have the house elves bring up some refreshments before dinner," Narcissa suggested, trying to ease the tension.

"Sounds like a wonderful idea, Narcissa," Severus agreed. The Malfoys turned to lead the way into the sitting room and Severus leaned over and hissed angrily, "Harry, what happened to behaving?"

"I am, Dad! But I wanted to make sure Draco knew that Holly wasn't just his sister." Harry whispered back.

Severus nearly groaned aloud. "Harry, for Merlin's sake, please try and control your mouth. Holly can have two brothers, it's not the first time in the history of the world that's happened. Now, remember your manners, I don't want to have this conversation again, clear?"

"Yes, sir," muttered his son. Then he followed the others into the sitting room.

"That boy is going to drive me to drink on a daily basis!" Severus said out of the corner of his mouth to Silver, who grinned at him. "I'm so glad you find this funny."

Silver merely looked at him, his amber eyes alight with amusement.

When Severus walked over to the couch, he found the house elves had brought a tray with various finger foods on it, like cheese and crackers, small meat and fruit pasties, pretzels, cucumber sandwiches, and mini fried chicken wings.

"Dinner should be along shortly. Would you care for a glass of wine, Severus?"

Severus hesitated, he normally did not indulge in alcohol, but after the day he had . . . one drink wouldn't do him any harm. "Yes, please."

"White or red."

"White, chardonnay if you have it."

"Of course." Narcissa rose and went over to a small sideboard and poured them both a glass of chardonnay.

The children were nibbling at the appetizers, and Draco eyed Silver curiously. "Your dog looks like he's part wolf, Holly. Does he bite?"

"He is part wolf. And Malamute. His name is Silver, and no, he won't ever bite unless someone tries to hurt me or Harry. He's a guard dog."

Silver came over when he heard his name and sat down next to Harry, who stroked his fur. He sniffed at Draco curiously, and the blond boy stiffened a bit.

"May I pet him?"

"Sure. He likes his ears scratched." Harry said.

Draco reached out a hand and started to stroke Silver's head, marveling at how thick and soft the gray fur, tipped with black about his ears, was. He gradually worked his way up and around the big wolf's ears, rubbing them gently. Silver sighed in pleasure. "Merlin, but he's some animal. I never had a pet, except for my owl. Father didn't much care for dogs, said they were stupid smelly creatures."

Silver whuffed in annoyance.

"No offence, Silver!" Draco said hastily, afraid the wolf-dog might bite him.

Harry and Holly snickered. "He won't hurt you," Holly reassured her half-brother. "He just doesn't like comments like that."

"Can he understand everything we say?" Draco asked, flushing slightly.

"Uh, we're not sure just how much he can understand, but he's much brighter than your average dog or wolf," Harry said. "Sometimes, it's like he can read your mind. He saved my life once. When I was seven, I was skating on a pond in Yorkshire and I fell through the ice and almost drowned, but Silver pulled me out . . ."

While Harry related the events of that long ago winter when he had first encountered Silver, Severus and Narcissa sipped their wine and Narcissa inquired after his wounded arm.

"It's fine. It should be mended by tonight," Severus told her. "Have you spoken to your solicitor again?"

"Yes. He's drawing up the papers and should be owling them any day now. If Lucius cooperates, the divorce should go through within a month. Of course, that would take a miracle, and I'm sure he's foaming at the mouth wondering where I've taken Draco." She bit her lip nervously and drank some more wine. "How safe is the school?"

"Very safe, else I would not have taken my children here, Cissa. Albus has strengthened the wards and he will not be able to enter the castle. Or the grounds nearest it either."

Narcissa sagged in relief. "That's very good news. Would you care to share with me the emergency that required Minerva to drag you away without even giving you time to tend to your injury?"

"It involved the expulsion of a student. A young man by the name of Shelby Cross, formerly of Gryffindor," Severus replied, knowing he could not keep Narcissa from finding out, it would be all over the school by tomorrow, as well as in the Prophet, if it wasn't already.

Both of the witch's eyebrows went up. "An expulsion? On what grounds?"

Severus told her. He knew Narcissa would not feel obligated to defend Cross's misdeed the way some purebloods would, for she was not that prejudiced against Squibs. "It had to be done. An example had to be made, or else any Squib at Hogwarts, including Holly, would be fair game. It is time, and past time, for certain old hatreds to die, Narcissa. Or else we shall be easy prey for You-Know-Who's propaganda again. As we were when he first came to power. And the pureblood shall inherit the earth, by virtue that their blood is unstained by Muggles and power belongs to those who are born to it." The Potions Master quoted softly, the words leaving a bitter taste in his mouth.

"But that is a lie. For every family, even the Malfoys, have some Muggle ancestry," murmured Narcissa.

"Yes, but it is a lie that is easily overlooked. As is another lie." Here he lowered his voice even further. "Hardly any now remember this little fact, but You-Know-Who is not a pureblood. He is a half-blood, like I am. Born of a witch mother-Merope Gaunt and a Muggle father, Tom Riddle. He is a distaff descendent of Salazar Slytherin, but he is not a pureblood."

Narcissa went pale. "You know this for a fact?"

Severus nodded. "It is down in the school records, should anyone care to look. When I first became a spy, I researched everything I could about my enemy, and that is one thing I discovered. Tom Riddle, the ultimate pureblood dictator, is not even of the class he values so highly. He lies even to himself, and believes his own lies, which is why he is so dangerous."

Narcissa's mouth turned down in distaste. "And Lucius wonders why I cannot stomach him being a follower any longer. I have lived a lie for over half of my adult life, Severus, and now I am done with it. Now I shall, at long last, lead my own life."

"Good for you, Cissa! But be careful. Lucius will not forgive you for taking Draco away from him."

"Too bad. Centuries ago, a child belonged to his mother alone, and it was she who raised him as she saw fit. The man had no say in it."

"You speak of the worship of the Goddess, Gaia."

"Yes. For thousands of years She held sway, until men destroyed Her with their lies. Perhaps it is time for me to take back the old ways, Severus, and raise my son in the ancient traditions."

"If you think that is best," Severus shrugged. He personally had no quarrel with the worshippers of Gaia, though he knew Lucius would be furious. Lucius believed quite firmly that a woman should be subservient to a man. "But before you plan too far ahead, Cissa, Lucius must be dealt with. And the children are no doubt starving, so let us have supper."

Narcissa chuckled. "Of course, Severus." She clapped her hands to summon a house elf.

* * * * *

Dinner consisted of tender cuts of lamb with a succulent brown gravy or mint jelly, new roasted potatoes, and tender creamed spinach, as well as rosemary bread with butter. For a sweet there was a delicious strawberry and chocolate trifle along with hazelnut coffee for the

adults and creamy hot cocoa for the children. All of them ate until they were stuffed, and Silver eagerly devoured the leftovers.

Then Severus turned the discussion to the lessons he was teaching Harry and he offered to tutor Draco as well, if Narcissa wished. "I'm teaching Harry basic charms and potions, nothing too advanced, but things that every well-rounded student ought to know," Severus explained.

"Yes, I think that would be a wonderful idea. I didn't want Draco to fall behind in his studies. Thank you, Severus."

Harry frowned, he wasn't all too sure he liked the idea of sharing his lessons with Draco. The boy had been polite, but sometimes he thought he caught the other wizard looking at Holly strangely, with a slightly superior air. Remember where he came from, Harry. His dad hated Squibs, so maybe he feels the same way. If he starts anything with Holly . . . He quickly shelved that line of thought. Don't go borrowing trouble was a favorite maxim of Severus's, and it meant Harry shouldn't worry about something until it happened.

"I have Harry's lessons on Wednesdays and Fridays, as well as part of Saturday, as those are the times I have a free period. I try and schedule them during the afternoon and early evening if possible, around three or four o'clock. Right after I finish tutoring Holly."

Draco stared at him. "You teach her too? But I thought she was . . .er . . .a Squib."

"She is, but I don't teach her magic, but Muggle subjects, like math, history, and natural science and language arts. Although, she has helped Harry and I prepare potion ingredients before, since that doesn't require any spellcasting."

"I wasn't aware you could teach all those subjects, Severus." Narcissa sounded impressed.

"I was brought up as a Muggle until I was eleven years old. I still recall the curriculum and have gotten several teaching texts for children who are homeschooled. It really isn't that difficult," Severus

said modestly. "I was always good at maths and science, and I enjoy history and literature as well. Holly is a very good student, she retains everything she reads."

Holly beamed at the unexpected praise, she always felt wonderful when Severus gave her a compliment, it was not something she had ever received much of with Lucius, and after what had occurred that fateful winter's night, she found it difficult to regain her lost self-esteem. But slowly but surely, with the help of Healer Keegan and her new family, she was beginning to heal, and to return to the happy confident girl she had once been.

Draco whistled. "Lucky you. I wish I could do that."

Holly blushed, looking down at her empty dessert cup. "I've always been able to do that. My mum used to call me her little Remembrall, because I never forgot anything. She used to recite potion ingredients to me before we went to the apothecary and if she forgot something, I could remember it for her. But she was smart too, she hardly ever did."

"I remember Valina. She was very bright, became Head Girl of her year," Narcissa said quietly. "A brilliant Potions Mistress and very kind too."

"That's so. She was my tutor for Advanced Potions," Severus recalled. "I learned a great deal about solutions and inventing new elixirs and such. Valina was always good at coming up with new variations of old potions, and they usually worked better than the original ones. Her loss was a great blow for the Society of Potions Masters."

Holly bit her lip, for speaking about her mother made her miss her terribly, even though she knew Severus and Narcissa didn't mean to make her upset. She quickly grabbed a napkin and used it to wipe her face, dabbing at her eyes when she thought no one was looking. She would not disgrace herself by crying in front of her half-brother, then he would surely think her nothing but a blubbering baby.

Silver nudged her gently under the table, and she buried her fingers in his ruff and held on tight. The great wolf always seemed to know

when she was upset and would always come and let her pet him or hug him. She loved stroking his thick fur, it always made her feel better.

Perhaps sensing the topic of conversation was making Holly unsettled, Harry changed the subject, telling Draco that he had better watch out for Throckmorton. "He's a nasty git, he doesn't like me or Holly and he probably won't like you either, since your Holly's brother too," Harry predicted.

"Who's he?" Draco asked.

"The Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. He's a bloody bugger that hates Squibs." Harry replied, forgetting to watch his mouth.

"Harry James Snape!" Severus rebuked an instant later. "Watch your mouth, young man! You know better than to use such language!"

"Sorry," Harry apologized, wondering if he was going to end up eating soap tonight. "But he is, Dad. You know he is."

"Whether or not Professor Throckmorotn is what you said, you don't use such words around ladies or polite company, Mr. Snape." Severus scolded. "Forgive him, Narcissa. He's at that age."

"Yes, I know. Draco had the same problem a few months ago," she said, giving the professor a sympathetic look.

Draco blushed, embarrassed. "Real nice, Mother!" he murmured.

"Although, Harry is correct, you should beware of Throckmorton, he is a shady character and I do not trust him at all. So stay clear of him, he has already been given strict orders to leave my children alone, as he has harassed and insulted Holly twice since we arrived here," Severus related.

"Draco, you heard Professor Snape. Stay away from the man." Narcissa ordered. The man sounds like another Lucius.

"Yes, Mother."

Severus looked at his watch, it was already eight-thirty. "Narcissa, it was pleasure having dinner with you and Draco, but it's getting late. We have a busy morning tomorrow, although we were planning an outing by the lake tomorrow afternoon, if you would care to join us?"

"Yeah. We were going to go skating," Holly said. "And after have pumpkin pasties and hot cider and cinnamon buns and cocoa. It's fun."

"D'you know how to skate, Draco?" Harry asked.

"Yes. Mother taught me. But you still skate even after that accident, Harry?"

"Sometimes. I don't like it as much as I used to, but Dad always checks the ice before he lets me skate and Silver watches too." Harry said, but he would never admit that skating sometimes made him get nervous and his stomach turn over. "It's not so bad. But the treats are the best part."

"I haven't skated for years, but I think I still remember," Narcissa said with a soft laugh. "Draco? Would you like to go?"

The blond boy considered. "All right."

"Good. Meet us by the lake around two o'clock. By then everything should have settled down from the morning," Snape said.

"Settled down?" Narcissa repeated, puzzled. "What's going on?"

"They're going to expel Cross, the bloody bounder," Holly spoke up before Severus could answer. "He's the one who hung Mr. Filch upside down and nearly made him have a heart attack."

"Holly Amanda Sinclair! Not you too!" Severus scolded. "Must I fetch a bar of soap when we get home? Because it would seem the two of you need one."

Holly froze. "No, sir. I'm really sorry! I didn't mean to, it just slipped out!" she cried, biting her lip hard to stop the automatic flow of tears.

Severus winced, but did not relent. Swearing was one thing he did not tolerate. "Since this is a first offence, I will let you off with a lecture, young lady. But if you repeat it, you shall be eating soap for breakfast, as will Harry. Am I clear?"

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry." She sniffled, looking utterly miserable.

Severus had to fight not to apologize for his harsh tone, her woeful eyes would have melted the heart of a dementor. "Yes well, watch your mouth and we won't need to have this discussion again," he said gruffly. "There will be a public ceremony in the hall, the Headmaster wants all the students and staff to witness the snapping of Cross's wand, as an object lesson and a warning. This is the first expulsion in fifty years, or so the Headmaster has told me, and he wishes to emphasize that crimes against minorities will not be tolerated."

"Do you think he would mind if we came to witness it?" Narcissa asked.

"No. I think the whole school plus some of Hogsmeade will be there." Severus answered. "The boy's father is a Ministry official, I wouldn't be surprised if he tries to plead clemency for his son. But Albus will not bend on this."

"He has changed then."

Severus nodded. "As must we all. Good night, Narcissa, Draco. Come, children. Say good night, you need to go to sleep, it's been a long day for us all."

After the two Snape children had said goodnight, Severus led them out of the guest quarters and back to their own apartment, Silver padding along inbetween both children, so each could rest a hand on his broad back.

"Go and get ready for bed," the Potions Master ordered softly once they were back in their own apartments.

Harry and Holly silently obeyed, getting into their pajamas and brushing their teeth and then bidding each other good night before getting into their bed. Severus gave them a half-an-hour to read or write in her journal, in Holly's case, before he came to tuck them in and turn off the lights.

Severus went first to Harry, who had fallen asleep with his glasses and a book of wizard adventure tales over his face again. Shaking his head in fond exasperation, his father gently removed both book and spectacles and placed them on the nightstand before gently tucking his son's blankets snugly about him.

Harry never stirred, he was fast asleep, his mind wandering the realm of dreams.

Severus brushed his hand lightly over his son's head, gently rubbing the famous scar. "Sleep well, Little Mischief." He gave his sleeping son a gentle kiss on the scar before departing to Holly's room.

He found his daughter still awake, scribbling in her pink journal. "Holly, time for bed," he said quietly.

The girl started, she had not heard him come in. She immediately set the journal aside and scrambled under the covers. "Severus, are you still mad at me?" she inquired softly. "I promise to never swear again. But that Cross, he made me so mad, what he did to Mr. Filch, I mean . . ."

"I understand, little one," Severus said, sitting on the edge of her bed. "It's all right if you're angry at what he did, but you shouldn't use those words to express your feelings. I don't want my daughter, or my son either, to sound like a Knockturn Alley thug."

Holly looked down at her coverlet. "You're disappointed in me, aren't you?"

"Only for tonight. Not forever," he reassured, gently brushing away the tears in her eyes with one callused thumb. "Holly, every child makes mistakes, but I will always forgive you for them. I am not

Lucius. I'm not angry with you any more. Now, close your eyes, little one, and sleep. Tomorrow is a new day with no mistakes in it."

He began to gently card his hand through her hair, and hum a soft lullaby. Soon Holly found her eyes shutting and her last thought before she succumbed to sleep's gentle embrace was that tomorrow she would make sure she made Severus proud of her.

So what did you think of Narcissa's little heart-to-heart with Draco? And Filch? And how did you like the first meeting between the Malfoys and the Snapes?

Thanks to everyone who has reviewed and alerted this story, I'm so happy you like it.

Next: The expulsion of Cross, and the outing at the lake, where everything does not go as expected.

The Lesson

The Great Hall

8AM Sunday

Myriad students shifted and murmured among themselves as they stood at attention in front of their tables beneath their House banners. The hall was filled to capacity, the entire student body was there, as well as some onlookers from Hogsmeade who wished to see the first expulsion in over fifty years. By now it was all over the papers, how Cross had gotten himself expelled for "conduct unbecoming a Hogwarts student and for extreme malice and prejudice towards the steward of the castle".

As predicted, Benjamin Cross had come to Hogwarts Saturday evening and attempted to get a reduced sentence for his son, arguing that it was a first offence and leniency was called for. But Albus, despite his regretful grandfatherly demeanor, refused to budge. And not even Cross senior's honey tongue could sway him.

"What your son did is inexcusable, Mr. Cross. He nearly caused the death of an innocent man, one who has served this school faithfully for decades, and who had no means of defending himself against an attack like that. No, I'm afraid we cannot just chalk this up to youthful misdeeds and let it go."

"Come now, Dumbledore! You were a boy once, you know the sort of hijinks boys get up to. That's all this was-a mere prank."

But Dumbledore was adamant. "I'm sorry you see it that way, Mr. Cross. But this was no mere prank. Your son intended harm to another, and willingly cast spells upon Argus Filch because he was- and I quote-" Squibs are always expendable. Who needs 'em? Waste of space, in my opinion ." and left him suspended upside down from a forty foot ceiling almost naked for over three hours! Were it not for the skilled healing of both my medi-witch and my Potions Master, my steward might well have died. That is not any kind of prank, Mr. Cross, it is a felony. And I shall not have such go on in my school."

He simply ignored the other's protests, and then he informed Cross senior that he would be performing the expulsion ceremony tomorrow morning at eight o'clock, he should be present afterwards to escort his son off the premises.

Now, students and staff were gathered in the hall, awaiting the start of the proceedings. In years past, the Ceremony of Shattering had been performed with only the Headmaster and Deputy Headmaster or Headmistress and the Heads of Houses as witnesses, but Dumbledore wished to make this a public viewing, in hope that seeing justice done would convince other students who were like Cross that such was the wrong path.

Holly and Harry stood next to Narcissa and Draco, off to the left of the dais where the staff normally sat to have meals. The large table had been banished for the time being, replaced by a large block of granite upon which rested an innocuous looking ash wand . Standing atop the dais were five people, all four Heads of House, and Argus Filch. Argus was still off-color from his ordeal but he was to play a crucial role in the ceremony, and so Madam Pomfrey reluctantly released him from her care, despite the fact that he wasn't quite recovered yet.

The four Heads stood grim and disapproving in front of four small tables upon which rested several possessions of the former student. In front of McGonagall was a school robe bearing the Gryffindor crest and a set of Quidditch robes, in front of Snape a black cauldron and a potions kit, in front of Sprout a set of parchment and quills, and Flitwick had several textbooks. Filch was behind the block of granite, waiting impatiently for Albus to make his entrance with the guilty party.

As if on cue, mournful music began playing from invisible musical instruments, and the doors swung open to admit the Headmaster and Cross.

Albus was wearing his very formal Headmaster gown, a somber black and midnight blue affair, not his usual moon and stars purple robe, and carrying a tall staff in his hand. His face was devoid of merriment, the blue eyes solemn. He walked one pace to the right and behind Cross, who was wearing plain clothes and had his hands bound in front of him by what looked like some kind of plant.

He was sullen and unrepentant, the picture of a rebellious adolescent. As he began the Walk of Shame, some students jeered at him and others glared angrily and a few turned their backs upon him, but most stared openly.

"What's that he's got around his hands?" Harry asked.

"I believe it's a snippet of Devil's Snare." Narcissi replied out of the corner of her mouth. "Now hush. We're supposed to be silent until the Headmaster gives us leave to speak."

"Why?"

"To show our disappointment and disapproval," she hissed.

Harry shut his mouth, and so did everyone else.

The pregnant silence descended over the hall like a pall of doom, broken only by the harsh skirling of invisible bag pipes, as if for a funeral dirge.

Atop the dais, Severus fought to keep from wincing. Merlin, Albus, could you not find different music to play? Those bagpipes go right through my head like the screeching of adolescent girls. I'm going to need a Headache Remedy once this is over with, no doubt.

But at last Albus and Cross had reached the dais, and the old wizard made an abrupt gesture, and the invisible music ceased. He placed a hand upon Cross's shoulder, the boy flinched and glared at him, but Albus ignored the hostility and turned the teen to face the assembled students and other onlookers.

Albus raised the staff and brought it down three times upon the floor, then he said in a ringing tone that carried to the furthest reaches of the hall, "As you are all no doubt aware, we are gathered here upon this Sunday morn to witness the Ceremony of Shattering. Such a ceremony has not been required since before I became Headmaster, and it is with great regret that I now perform this one."

He turned to Cross and said sternly, "Shelby Turner Cross, you have been found guilty of conduct unbecoming a Hogwarts student and malice aforethought against steward Argus Filch, Squib, and faithful caretaker of the castle. It is to your shame that you did use forbidden magic to harm said steward, with clear intent to harm and remain unrepentant. This institution refuses to recognize you any longer as a student or a wizard of standing. You are persona non grata-outcast."

He brought the staff down hard on the floor.

Then Minerva drew her wand and intoned sharply, "You are no longer a Gryffindor, Shelby Turner Cross. I declare you unfit and unworthy to bear the crest and the robe. I see you not."

Her wand stabbed down at the pile of clothing, and it rose up into the air and shredded itself until there was nothing remaining but strips of red, gold, and black cloth, drifting through the air.

Then she motioned to the members of her House, and as one, all the Gryffindors shouted, "We see you not!" and turned their backs to the dais.

Then Severus stepped forward, his wand pointed down at the cauldron and the potions kit. "You are no longer fit to be my student, Shelby Turner Cross. You have disgraced the honor of the school past bearing. You are unworthy and unfit to bear the cauldron and the kit of a true wizard. I see you not."

He glared at the young man, who shrank away from the predatory obsidian gaze.

Then Severus hissed something and the cauldron and the potions kit exploded soundlessly in midair, leaving only droplets of several regeants to fall upon the stone floor.

He gestured to his Slytherins, who enthusiastically shouted, "We see you not!" and turned their backs.

Professor Sprout was next, her face stern and set. "You are no longer welcome as my student, Shelby Turner Cross. You have crossed an

unforgivable line. You are unworthy and unfit to hold a quill and record the wisdom of your fellow wizards. I see you not."

She waved her wand above the quill and parchment and they immediately became confetti, mixing with the remains of the robes and the potions ingredients upon the stone floor in mute testimony to the wrong done.

The Hufflepuffs echoed the other two Houses, also turning their back upon the outcast.

Shelby remained silent, his head tilted defiantly, but he went pale as one by one, the Heads of House destroyed his things.

Flitwick coughed, frowning hard at the young wizard. Then he said, in a quiet voice filled with disapproval, "You are disgraced as my student, Shelby Turner Cross. You used magic intolerably. You are unworthy and unfit to be privy to the knowledge and craft of a true wizard. I see you not."

He waved his wand and spoke a sharp, "Incendio!"

The books in front of him burst into flame.

When they had been burnt to cinders, Flitwick canceled the spell. Then he gestured and the Ravenclaws stood and intoned, "We see you not." And then spun about to face the hall doors.

Albus banged his staff down on the floor again three times and then said, "Shelby Cross, outcast, your wand is forfeit according to ancient decree, for you are unfit and unworthy to be part of our company. May Merlin have mercy upon you."

He nodded to Argus, who moved up to the block of granite and lifted the ash wand. "As the one you wronged, I claim the right of shattering. Shelby Turner Cross, you are unfit to wield magic. I declare you broken!"

Filch lifted the wand high above his head.

Everyone in the room suddenly whirled around and faced the dais.

Then the Squib brought the wand down upon the edge of the granite block.

There was a tremendous CRACK!

And the wand shattered.

Cross cried out, whether in protest or pain, no one knew. He then tried to spring at Argus, but Dumbledore jerked him back.

Cross turned upon the other wizard, flecks of spittle upon his lips, his eyes burning with a terrible loss and hatred. "I'll get you for this, old man! If it's the last thing I do, I'll make you pay!"

"Silence, Nameless One! It is finished. Get thee hence, outcast. Hogwarts sees you not!"

At that, the rest of the spectators and the staff, including the Heads and Argus, all turned their backs to Cross.

And Albus practically dragged the furious teenager off the dais and back down the hall, amid the jeers and taunts of his former classmates.

Catching the drift of the students, Harry, Holly, and Draco also started yelling insults, until Narcissa hushed them. "There is no need to behave like wild barbarians."

"But Mother, everyone else is doing it," Draco argued, a bit petulantly.

Narcissa shot her son a Look. "Just because everyone is doing something doesn't mean you follow them like a brainless sheep, Draco. Think before you act. If a child challenged you to jump off the Astronomy tower, would you do it?"

"No, of course not! That's suicide!"

"My point exactly."

Invisible hands propelled Cross forward and threw him out of the doors, then the doors shut with a clap.

Albus turned to face the students and said sternly, "Let this be a lesson to all of you in the rewards of intolerance and hatred. We are all worthy of dignity and respect, whether wizard, Squib, or Muggle. Take heed from Cross's example and 'ware following him down that road, for it shall only end in shame and disgrace. You are dismissed. You may resume your normal classes."

The students began to file out of the hall, still a bit shell shocked, but soon they were talking among themselves, albeit in more subdued tones than normal. It was now the general consensus that it didn't pay to get Dumbledore riled at you, and perhaps Squibs were not as bad as purebloods thought.

Narcissa waited until most of the students had left the hall before taking the children back to her quarters, where they played several games of Exploding Snap and Gobstones with Draco before Severus came to take them back to their own quarters to have some lunch and change into cold weather outfits so they could go skating.

* * * * *

After the excitement of the morning, all of them were glad to relax and do something fun for a change. Harry soon discovered that Draco could skate nearly as well as he could, and enjoyed racing across the frozen lake. Holly was very good as well, and she could do spins and a double twist that impressed her brothers, who didn't think she could keep up with them.

"Where did you learn to skate like that, Holl?" Harry asked, gliding to a halt in front of her.

"My mum. She used to love skating and she liked to watch Muggle skaters down at the ice rink near her home when she was a kid. Some of the really good ones taught her how to do flips and stuff and she showed me. It's the only sport I was ever really good at." Holly admitted.

"You are quite good for your age, dear," said Narcissa, who was gliding in lazy figure eights, like a graceful swan. "I don't think I would be bold enough to attempt that, I'd probably fall and break something."

Holly blushed slightly. "I did fall a lot, in the beginning. But Mum used to say that practice makes perfect and to get up and start again. She was always there, watching, until she saw I could do it right."

"Valina was a very good teacher," Severus praised. "And I can see that you learned a great deal from her, Holly. Would you show me that double twist again?"

And Holly did, moving smoothly across the ice and then arcing up into a flowing double twist and landing on one foot.

"Well done!" Severus clapped and so did Harry and Narcissa.

After a moment, Draco followed suit, though he was a bit resentful that a girl, especially a Squib, could do something better than he could. But he wasn't about to admit it, and waited until the two adults grew tired and skated off the lake to summon the refreshments before challenging Harry to a race.

"Can I race too?" Holly asked.

"No," Draco said abruptly. "I don't race against girls."

"Why not?" the girl queried, a bit hurt.

"Because you're too little and it's not done, that's why."

"But she can skate as good as either of us," Harry argued.

Draco glared at him. "What are you, a pansy-arse, Snape?"

"No! I can take you any day of the week, Malfoy!"

"Oh, yeah? Let's see it then!" The blond whirled around and crouched, then began to skate off to the far side of the lake.

"Hey! You stupid . . .!" Harry cried angrily. "You didn't even wait for me to start."

"Go get him, Harry!" Holly yelled, hoping he would catch the blond boy and put him in his place.

Harry skated faster, trying his best to catch up with the other boy. It was hard, because Draco had a good four second lead. But Harry used to race against Severus sometimes, and his father was very quick on his skates. He had taught Harry how to put a good deal of power behind his strokes and move quickly and easily over the ice. Though it had been a long time since those lessons, Harry still recalled what Snape had taught him, and he crouched low and made each stroke count.

Without even realizing it, he was catching up to Draco, who was fighting to hang on to the lead he had. Harry was pleased to note the other wizard looked nervous, and wanted badly to say something humiliating, but decided to save his breath and just skate.

He concentrated hard and forced his legs to move a bit faster and extend just a little further, until he suddenly was even with Draco. Then and only then did he lift his head and cry, "Eat this, Malfoy!" Before he shot past the other, reaching the edge of the pond a good half a foot before his rival. He skated about in a semi-circle, giving Draco a triumphant smirk.

Holly was jumping up and down, cheering. "Harry won! Hooray! I knew you were a better skater, Harry!"

Draco, unused to being shown up by anyone, spun around and skated halfway across the ice up to Holly and snapped, "Shut your trap, Squib brat! Your opinion's worthless."

It had not been what he was intending to say, but it slipped out of his mouth, he had heard the sentiment so many times from Lucius.

Holly flinched, the words striking her a sharp blow, but before she could respond, Harry came to her defense, having followed Malfoy across the ice.

"You take that back, Malfoy!" he growled, his hands clenched, his green eyes flashing. "Or so help me, I'll knock your teeth down your throat. Holly's opinion matters more than yours from where I'm standing."

"Back off, Snape!" Draco cried, feeling the unaccustomed sting of shame, but not knowing how to admit he was wrong, for Lucius had taught his son that he need never apologize for anything a Malfoy said was right. "Mind your own business!"

"Holly is my business! She's my sister and you can't talk to her that way!"

"Since when?" Draco threw back. "She might live with you, but she's my father's daughter. And I'll talk to her however I please!"

"Like hell!" Harry snarled, and started to draw back his fist.

"Don't, Harry!" Holly cried. "You promised Severus, no fighting!"

"I know, but-"

"Better watch it, Snape. Wouldn't want to get in trouble with Daddy, now would you?" Draco teased, smirking unbearably. "He might spank you." Then Draco skated off, laughing scornfully.

"Why that little . . ." Harry trailed off, then started to go after the other boy, his eyes gleaming with the light of battle.

Holly grabbed his arm and held him back. "Harry, no! I won't let you get into a fight over me. Just forget it, okay?"

"Why? Just because he's your real brother doesn't mean he can talk about you that way." Harry argued softly.

"Please, Harry! I already got you in trouble once, it's not worth it," she insisted stubbornly.

"I don't care! Let me go, Holly!"

"No. If you break your promise, Severus will be so mad, and I don't want you to get grounded. Or worse."

Harry huffed exasperatedly. "I can live with Dad punishing me."

"I can't." Holly said, sniffing. "Besides, I've heard worse."

"So? That doesn't make it right. He needs his arse kicked."

"I know. But some other time. Okay? He's a jealous spoiled brat, you know." She gave him her most pleading stare.

He groaned. "Fine. It can wait." He relaxed and Holly released him.

Just then, they heard Severus calling them to come and have cinnamon buns and hot cocoa.

For an instant, Harry considered telling his father what Draco had said to Holly. But he didn't want to look like a tattletale baby. He was too old to be running and telling Severus every little thing, he was old enough to pick his own battles. And he wanted the satisfaction of making Draco eat his own words.

Draco looked up uneasily as the two skated over to the edge of the pond and exchanged their skates for their snow boots. He knew he shouldn't have made that remark about Holly, not after what had transpired that morning in the hall, but it was too late now to take it back. He wondered if either of the other kids would squeal on him, but Harry just shot him a glare before walking over to pour himself a cup of cocoa from the steaming tea cozy resting on the small table.

Severus glanced up at his son and noticed there seemed to be something bothering him. "Something wrong, Harry?"

"No. I'm fine," he said quickly, sipping his cocoa. It tasted wonderful, all rich and creamy and it warmed him right up. "This is really good, Dad."

Holly accepted a cup from Severus and thanked him, then picked up a cinnamon bun and sat next to Harry to eat it.

Draco pretended they weren't snubbing him and ignored them.

The Potions Master frowned, sensing that all was not well between the three, but decided not to pry. Children tended to fight one moment and make up the next and he had seen them racing across the lake and assumed it probably had something to do with Harry beating Draco. Lucius's son looked sulky, Severus thought, then turned back to his own cup of mulled cider, resolving to let the boys sort it out on their own.

Once they had finished off the pot of cocoa and nearly all the buns plus the cider as well, the adults said it was time to go back inside, as the temperature was dropping.

"It feels like it might snow tonight," Narcissa remarked.

"It's possible," agreed Severus. "Snow storms come up suddenly around this time of year. Well, we'd best head inside, before all of us freeze." He banished the remains of the picnic with a brief wave of his wand.

"Severus, what about Silver?" Holly asked suddenly, remembering that the wolf had gone to hunt in the forest. "He hasn't come back yet."

"Don't worry, Silver knows enough to come home before a storm sets in," Severus reassured her. He rose, wrapped his green and silver scarf about his face and began to walk back towards the gray stone castle.

Draco lingered a little ways behind the two adults and hissed at Harry, "How about a rematch, Snape? Tomorrow afternoon, meet me here and then we'll see if you're all talk and no action."

"Fine, Malfoy. One o'clock,"

"I'm coming too," Holly said firmly, for she suspected that far more than a race was about to go on.

"Who asked you?" Draco demanded.

"I don't need your permission, Draco," Holly told him. "I can go where I want."

Draco shrugged loftily. "Very well, Sinclair. Watch me mop up the ice with him if you want."

"You wish!" Harry snorted. "I beat you fair and square."

"You got lucky," Draco said dismissively. "Tomorrow will be a different story." Then he turned and walked away.

"That's what you think," Harry muttered. He was looking forward to tomorrow afternoon, for he planned on winning again, knowing that it would really get the proud boy's goat. And if Draco dared make one more sneering comment about Holly, he would happily knock the smugness right off his face and he'd pay the consequences afterward if Severus found out. It would be worth it, just to see Malfoy get what was coming to him.

Holly, who was trailing a little ways behind the two boys, glancing back towards the Forbidden Forest, hoping to see Silver coming back to the castle, noticed a group of older students gathered near the lakeshore. They were around Cross's age and sniggering and one cried, "Dumbledore's gone off his rocker, saying that Squibs are equal to one of us. Pranking old Filch was the best thing ever and now we're going to be bored stiff."

"Well, least we found this stupid scrawny cat to test out our latest spells on, Pritchard," laughed another. "Watch this! It's a cat pinwheel."

The boy pointed his wand and suddenly a ragged black and white kitten was flung into the air, meowing helplessly as it was spun about like a top, its legs splayed and all its fur standing up in spikes.

"Good one! Let me try." Another waved his wand and the kitten's fur suddenly vanished and the skin beneath became speckled with green and purple spots.

"What do you call that one, Demarest?"

"Polka-dot fantasy."

Holly stared in horror. Why, they're-they're torturing that poor kitten!

"Wait! I've got another!" the first giggled and pointed his wand again. "Look, it's hedgehog kitty!"

Now the kitten sported quills like a hedgehog and kept trying to curl up into a ball, meowing in confusion.

The three laughed as if it was the funniest thing they had ever seen.

That poor thing! How dare they? Suddenly she was furious, she had never been able to stand people being cruel to animals, and without stopping to think, Holly stormed over to the group and shouted, "Stop it, you wicked things! Leave that kitten ALONE! What's it ever done to you?"

One of the boys spun around in alarm. "What-oh, it's just a little girl. Get lost, kid!"

"Leave the kitten alone!"

"Mind your own business, brat!" snapped the one called Pritchard. "Now get, before I hex your nose off for sticking it where it doesn't belong."

He waved his wand threateningly at her.

She felt a shudder go through her, for she knew quite well how helpless she was against an armed wizard. But then she looked again at the defenseless kitten and the infamous Malfoy temper surged through her, giving her the courage to stand her ground.

"Well? Get your arse outta here, I'm warning you!" growled Pritchard.

Holly glared at him defiantly. "Let the kitten go, you rotten bully! How could you do that to it?"

"Easily. Want to see?"

They closed in around her, eyes gleaming like manticores who had just found a free meal.

Holly gulped, knowing she was in very serious trouble. Filch's warning flashed in her head. Don't go anywhere unless your father or brother or that great dog is with you. Alone, you're an easy mark.

But she had allowed her temper to run away with her and now she would pay the price.

Until she heard a familiar voice cry from behind her, "Hey! Get away from my little sister!"

"Harry?"

"Oooh, now I'm really scared!" jeered Demarest. "Look, mates, it's her 'big brother'!"

"Ahh . . .I'm so scared I can't move! It's a shrimp fest!"

Harry ignored their laughter. "I mean it! Leave her alone, or you'll regret it!"

"You and what army, midget?" brayed the third boy.

"Us," Draco replied.

The three teens looked up and froze.

For beside the blond boy was a huge silver wolf, growling menacingly.

And behind them came a dark figure, cloak billowing, wrath burning in his eyes.

"Oh bloody damn hell! It's Snape!" cried Pritchard. He went white . He started to back away, lowering his wand, praying Snape had not seen him draw it.

"Pritchard!" Severus barked. "Were you just pointing a wand at my children?"

Well, what did you think?

Were you surprised at Argus's role?

And what will Severus do to the three troublemakers?

Rescuing Magik

Sandy Pritchard stared up at his potions professor and knew he was doomed. The look on Snape's face would have made a dementor flee for cover. "What, sir? A wand, sir? No, sir, of-of course I'm not!" he babbled, feeling his stomach clench and sweat break out on his forehead. Oh Merlin, I'm so dead, I'm not going to see sixteen, he's going to murder me. Oh please, please . . .if he keeps looking at me like that I'm gonna wet myself.

Severus swept the three cowering miscreants with a dreadful glare before saying in a deadly quiet tone that spelled unlimited doom for those it was directed at, "I see. The wand just happened to be in your hand right then, yes?" Pritchard nodded frantically, all the color leached from his face, like a doll in a wax museum. "Now, why don't I believe you?"

"It's true, sir!" whined Demarest. "Ask her!" He pointed at Holly. "Tell him, we didn't hex you!" He was shaking too, wondering if should have made out his last will and testament that morning. Next to him, his other friend was doing his best to imitate a statue.

"Holly?" Severus did not take his eyes off the three students, but he cocked his head back to hear his daughter's reply.

"They didn't hex me, but they were casting spells on the poor kitten over there," she said. "Nasty ones, they were hurting the poor thing. I told them to stop and they wouldn't. Look at it!" She knelt beside the small kitten, who still bore strange spikes on its fur, like those of a hedgehog and was glassy eyed and sickly looking.

Severus directed his gaze towards the stricken animal, then back at the three and snarled, "Two Gryffindors and a Ravenclaw tormenting a defenseless animal. Is this how you interpret the Headmaster's command for inter-House cooperation and respect? Pathetic! Let's all come together and see how much misery we can dish out to another living creature," sneered the professor, his dark eyes snapping. "Did you learn nothing from this morning's ceremony? Perhaps you fell asleep during it? Or is it arrogance to assume that rules were meant for everyone except you?"

"N-no, sir," answered the Ravenclaw, Arthur Gallegher. "We saw it all. But, sir, we weren't hurting Squibs."

"Oh, and that makes it all right? You should not be hexing anything, Mr. Gallegher-Squibs, Muggles, or kittens!" Severus scolded, pinning the other with a relentless look that made the boy shuffle his feet and glance away. "If you think you are allowed to get away with such disgraceful behavior, think again! That'll be fifty points from each of you as well as a three month detention."

"Three months!" wailed Demarest.

"But Professor Snape, it was just a cat-" Pritchard began.

Severus leaned down and confronted the boy eye to eye. "Pritchard, by the time I am done with you, you will never let those words pass your lips again." He held out his hand abruptly. "Wands, gentlemen. They will be mine for the duration, you will get them back only for class and no other reason."

Horried wails accompanied this order.

Severus stared them down. "Do not test me, gentlemen. Wands! Now! Or would you like to follow Cross and be expelled?"

At that, the wands were placed in Snape's outstretched hand. "I shall be speaking to the Heads of your Houses, explaining my reasons for a protracted detention."

"No, sir! McGonagall will kill us!" cried the two Gryffindors. They knew quite well that after Cross's disgraceful behavior, McGonagall would have no mercy on those of her House who broke rules, for whatever reason.

"Oh well, gentlemen. Perhaps you should have thought of that before you drew a wand." Snape said silkily. "Something your former Housemate Cross didn't do either. That's always been the trouble with Gryffindors, you act first and think later, if at all. Something which I intend to break you of by the time this series of detentions is over

with. Or else the next time you hex an animal or a fellow classmate I shall see to it that you too participate in a Ceremony of Shattering. Have I made myself clear, gentlemen?"

All of them nodded miserably, and Severus tucked their wands into his robe and gestured for them to proceed him back to the castle.

"Dad, can we borrow your scarf?" asked Harry, who was peering at the kitten uneasily. "The kitten needs help, and we can't pick it up like this, it's half a hedgehog."

Severus knelt and wound his scarf about the injured kitten and gently handed it to Holly. "Take the kitten and go back to Narcissa's quarters. I need to deal with those three troublemakers there and I shall join you there later. Perhaps the hex they cast can be reversed."

Holly cradled the kitten close and said softly, "Poor thing! Don't worry, we'll save you." The kitten mewed softly.

"What do you plan on doing to them, Severus?" asked Narcissa, who had been observing from a short distance away.

"Something they will find highly unpleasant, but which fits their crime, Cissa," answered Severus, still furious over what had gone on. "I will have them processing the most vile potions ingredients I can think up as well as serving in Furkind Magical Creatures Hospital, helping the vets there reverse spell damage upon those animals rescued from abusive homes or experimental laboratories. That way they can see firsthand the sort of suffering and cruelty done by wizards to animals, that such behavior is abominable and not at all a laughing matter. They will also be required to write papers for me each week on their experiences, and hopefully the lesson will stick this time around. If not, I will recommend that they also be expelled, for those who torture animals may someday torture people, if not stopped now."

"Too true," agreed the blond witch, for she knew that sometimes the Death Eaters cast Unforgivables on animals as practice before casting them on other humans. Lucius had told her that. But these were young boys yet, perhaps they could be turned from the lefthand

path, for Merlin knew the last thing they needed was for more youth to be corrupted by Death Eater propaganda.

As Severus strode ahead of them, silent and grim as Death, Narcissa a few paces behind, Holly walked carefully next to Harry and Draco. She kept giving the kitten in her arms worried glances, it seemed to have trouble breathing and was shaking.

"Draco, your mum knows how to reverse spells, right? I think the kitten is getting worse."

"Yes. She's good at Transfiguration. Got top marks in her year," Draco said proudly. He peered at the small cat. "It doesn't look so good."

Holly nodded, and prayed they could help the poor thing. It didn't deserve to die because it had been the object of a cruel prank. "Thanks for coming to help me, all of you," she said gratefully, including Silver in her assessment.

The big wolf was pacing calmly beside Harry, his great head nearly level with the boy's chest. He turned and gave a worried whine when Holly spoke his name. Clearly he was upset about the kitten's condition also.

"Did you really think I'd watch those stupid gits hurt you and not come and help you?" Harry asked, a slightly hurt tone in his voice.

"No, but . . ." Holly began, then trailed off, not wanting to say that she had been surprised that Draco had come to defend her as well.

Her half-brother flushed slightly and said awkwardly, "You're a Malfoy when all's said and done and . . . I won't let anyone hurt my sister."

"Even if she's a Squib?" demanded Harry sharply. He was still angry at Draco's words to Holly.

Draco nodded. "I . . . didn't mean that . . . Father used to say that so much . . . it just . . . I just . . . anyway I won't say it again."

"I forgive you, Draco." Holly said generously. "Living with Lucius must have been hard."

"Sometimes, yes," answered the other guardedly.

By then they had reached the castle and Severus left to shepherd the three misbehaving students to his office, where he would summon their Heads of House and inform them of the boys' transgressions. "Merlin, but he's acting like we hexed his kids or something," muttered Demarest sulkily.

As Narcissa and the children turned right towards the guest quarters, they heard Severus scolding the boys sternly, "You ought to thank God you didn't hex my children, Demarest, or else there wouldn't be enough of you left to serve a detention with any teacher. You brought this upon yourselves, might I remind you? So bear your punishment like a man and quit that insufferable whining, I cannot abide it. My office, boys. March!"

They lost the rest of his lecture as they came to the Malfoy quarters and Narcissa unlocked the door.

"Put the kitten on the table here," Narcissa ordered, enlarging the table with a deft movement of her wand.

Holly gently set the kitten down on the table, unwinding Severus's scarf from it gently.

It lay wheezing upon the table, its green eyes dull, its quill-like fur flattened limply against its sides.

"Hmm . . ." Narcissa studied the animal intently. "They didn't even complete the spell properly. The creature is only half transfigured. Idiots! I believe I can reverse this, but it would be much simpler if I knew exactly what they tried to cast. Holly, can you remember the spell they used?"

Holly closed her eyes, willing herself to recall what the Pritchard boy had shouted at the kitten.

"He said, Look, a hedgehog kitty and then he yelled Metamorphius Erinaceus and the kitten became like that."

"You are certain, child?"

"Yes, ma'am," Holly replied. "I remember everything I read or hear. That was what he said."

"Thank you, Holly. This will help immensely in reversing the spell," Narcissa said, then she drew her wand and intoned quietly, "Reversario metamorphia felis"

A white light enveloped the kitten and when it faded, the cat was back to its original state.

The children exchanged grins and clapped. "You did it!" Holly cheered. She went to stroke the kitten, who was blinking woozily, and frowned. "Mrs. Malfoy, the kitten still doesn't seem right. I think she's having trouble breathing."

"Let me see," Narcissa bent over the kitten. "Yes, there's something not right there. I fear whatever experimental spells those wretched boys cast harmed her more than I know how to fix. I'll have to ask Severus when he returns if he can make a Lung Restorative or something for her. Until then, the best we can do is give her some water and keep her warm."

The kitten lapped up a small amount of water and then the children took turns holding her wrapped in the scarf.

"Dad will fix her, don't worry, Holl," Harry reassured his sister, who looked so worried that he feared she was about to start crying. "He can fix just about anybody," said the Potion Master's son, utter confidence in his voice. "He healed me when I nearly drowned in the lake and he fixed you too, Holly, when you nearly froze to death. He'll save the kitten."

"Is he like a Healer too?" asked Draco, impressed by Harry's recitation.

"No, but he told me once that in order to get a Potions Mastery, you had to study with Healers for two years, since a Potion Master needs to know the antidotes for all the elixirs he brews and how they react with other mixtures and what effect they can have on people. So that's how come he knows about healing people."

"But Harry, this is a kitten, not a person." Holly reminded, twisting her hair nervously.

"No matter. Dad's helped Mrs. Norris too, when stupid kids pranked her last year. They gave her bat wings or something and Dad made a potion to fix her."

"Who's Mrs. Norris?"

"Filch's cat. His familiar," Harry explained. He told Draco all about the cat and the steward while they waited for Snape to return. Narcissa listened thoughtfully while Harry spoke, relieved that all the children seemed to be getting on. She disliked quarreling in her home.

* * * * *

"They did what?" McGonagall cried once Severus had summoned her to his office and related the circumstances behind his removal of so many House points and subsequent detention, which was recorded in the school detention logs. She was livid. "I cannot believe, after what went on this morning, that any student of my House could be so . . .so dense as to behave in such a reprehensible disgusting fashion!" She detested students who misused Transfiguration and to have done so right after the expulsion of one of her own . . .Minerva McGonagall was not in the mood to be lenient at all. She whirled upon her two House members.

"What in Merlin's bloody name were you thinking, Mr. Demarest and Mr. Pritchard? Did you think the ceremony was all a big joke? No? Then why did you feel the need to disregard today's lesson and cast hexes upon a defenseless kitten that way?"

When they attempted to give her the same pathetic excuse that they had the potions professor, she cut them off with a quick slash of her

hand. "Spare me your pitiful excuses, gentlemen! They are no reason to use my teachings in such a reckless and cruel manner. Professor Snape was right in giving you multiple detentions and I shall add to that by restricting you to the grounds for every Hogsmeade weekend till the end of the term and also notifying your parents of your behavior."

The two went pale at her final declaration. "No, please . . ." began Demarest.

"Silence! You are getting off easy, young man!" thundered Minerva. "You are lucky I don't snap your wand and send you home on the first train tonight. After Cross's betrayal, I refuse to overlook 'mere boyish mischief' any longer. Now shape up or else!"

Then she departed, taking her misbehaving students with her, after assuring Severus they would report to him at seven tomorrow for their detention, which would be held for four consecutive nights each week, leaving them time for studying and classes but precious little else.

Flitwick was also uncharacteristically stern with Gallegher, taking an additional twenty points from his own House and assigning a stint of scrubbing the Great Hall after supper without magic as well revoking Hogsmeade privileges. "I am terribly disappointed in you, Mr. Gallegher. A Ravenclaw does not follow others like a blind worn, unable to think for himself. You have shamed me deeply, boy. Your mother, were she alive, would be beside herself."

The boy hung his head. "I'm sorry, Uncle Filius. It won't happen again."

"It had better not! Severus, thank you for informing of my nephew's conduct. He is my ward now that my sister has passed the Veil. Come along, young man. I can see I have been too lenient with you, Arthur . . ." he marched from the office, his nephew following.

Severus raised an eyebrow after the two had departed. He had been unaware that Filius had a relative as a student, the Charms teacher was often closemouthed about his family. Perhaps this was a recent development, however . . .the Potions Master mused.

He Flooded from his office to the Malfoy guest quarters, and found three very worried children and one kitten who looked on the verge of breathing her last.

After casting a quick diagnostic, he determined that her lungs had been damaged by the miscast Transfiguration spell and summoned several potions to him.

The first one he administered, with a small medicine dropper, was a Breath Ease Elixir, diluted a bit since the kitten was so small. It was a potion that was given to patients with upper respiratory infections, like pneumonia.

"There! Now you can breathe somewhat easier," he whispered, then told Harry to hand him the potion in the blue bottle. "This is a Lung Repair Cordial, but I can only give her minute doses of this, about two drops every three hours. By a week, her lungs should be fully restored. She also needs a Nutrient Potion and a Muscle Relaxant draft since whatever those hoodlum cast upon her has caused her muscles to go into spasms."

"Where are we gonna keep her, Dad?" asked Harry then. "Should she be with us or Draco?"

"With you, I'd say," Narcissa said. "That way, if something unforeseen should happen, you have your lab nearby."

"Just so." Severus nodded. "The kitten will need round the clock care for the next few days." He looked at Holly and Harry speculatively. "Do you two think you can manage that? Or must I get Hagrid to monitor her?"

"No, sir. We can do it," Holly said eagerly. "Just tell us how much potions and when she needs them and I'll remember."

"We'll take turns," Harry said.

"I want to help too," Draco put in suddenly.

"Fine. All three of you listen closely," Severus said, pleased at the way all three children were willing to share the responsibility. He instructed them on how much of each potion to give the little cat and when and told them to also make she ate soft foods, like ground chicken and broth and drank plenty of water.

"She'll get better, won't she, Severus?"

The Potions Master put a hand on her shoulder. "I hope so, Holly. But if . . .she takes a turn for the worst, which could happen, you are not to blame yourself, understand? Sometimes animals die, despite all you do for them, and she might be too exhausted to fight to live, after enduring what those brats did to her for who knows how long. But I think she has a good chance, and if you all work together, she should recover."

"She will. Harry says you can fix anybody," Holly stated firmly.

Severus sighed. "Harry . . .I am not God. All I can do is try my best. Now, let's go and pay a visit to Mr. Filch, see if he has an extra cat box and a bed and some dishes that we can borrow until I can pick up some of our own."

They left the kitten sleeping on Draco's lap while they went to talk to Filch and get their quarters ready for the new pet.

* * * * *

Over the next week and a half, the children really pulled together and took turns giving the little kitten all the potions, petting her and feeding her. Caring for the injured cat caused the three to grow very close, as there is nothing like working together to save something to forge a friendship. All of them worked hard to encourage the kitten to get well and in the process discovered things about each other they had never known. Draco admitted that he had never healed anything before, that wasn't something Lucius thought was necessary for his heir to learn. "But it makes me feel good, seeing her getting better every time I give her the potions," he confided in his sister one day, as he gave the little black and white feline her daily dose of Lung Repair Cordial. "Father would say I've become a sissy, caring about a

mere animal this way, but I don't care. I don't want to be a Death Eater's son anymore."

"Good. You shouldn't. He's a horrible man and I'm glad you're not like him, Draco. I'm tired of my family thinking I'm worthless." Holly said.

"I'm sorry I ever said that. I was a stupid prat." Draco apologized, having finally learned how to do so by listening to Harry and Holly apologize to each other when they happened to get into a disagreement and also to Severus if they were in trouble with him.

"Just don't do it again, Mr. Malfoy," she mock-scolled, shaking a finger under his nose. "Or else I'll pop you one in the nose."

"Oh, right. I'll bet you don't even know how to throw a punch, little sister."

"You'd lose then," laughed Harry, coming into the den after finishing his afternoon lesson with Severus. "Or didn't we ever tell you about the time we got into a fight in Diagon Alley with some stupid kids and Holly punched one of them right in the nose and made him bleed all over?"

"You're putting me on, Snape!"

"Swear by my magic, I'm not," Harry argued. Then he began to tell the story of their disastrous trip to Diagon Alley to get Severus a birthday present.

Draco was quite impressed, and soon revised his thinking about his sister. Holly might be a Squib, but she was not a pushover. "And your father only grounded you for getting into a brawl in public?" he asked. "Mine would have thrashed me to ribbons for disgracing my House that way, Malfoys are supposed to be above reproach in public."

"That's awful!" Holly exclaimed. "Now I'm glad I didn't live with him, if that's how he treated you."

"He wasn't always hitting me, but when he felt I needed a thrashing, he gave it to me," Draco said quietly, flinching slightly.

"Not Dad. He doesn't believe in walloping kids too much. I can count on one hand the times he's ever raised a hand to me. And every time I deserved it," Harry admitted. "One time was because I touched his wand and lied about it, and the other was because I said I hated him and . . .that's about it."

"Really? And here I thought he was a strict hardarse."

"He is, Draco. Just not that way. His groundings aren't any fun, trust me. And his lectures make you feel so bad you wished he thrashed you. But he also forgives you after, and then it's over." He knelt and scratched the kitten's ears. "Hey, kitty, how are you doing today?"

"Much better. She actually ate almost a whole bowl of shredded chicken," Holly reported. "I think she's going to be fine." Her sapphire eyes glowed as she said that, for she had fallen in love with the kitten. "She needs a name, don't you think?"

The boys nodded, looking at each other. Then Harry said, "Since you were the one who rescued her, Holly, Draco and I think you should get to name her."

"Really, Harry?"

"Yes, and keep her too, if Severus lets you, that is." Draco added.

Holly gaped at them, speechless, and the two boys smirked and laughed at her thunderstruck expression. "You really want me to keep her?"

Draco nodded. "If it weren't for you, she might have died from those pranks those idiots cast on her. And you need a pet more than I do, Holl. I've already got my owl."

"Thanks, Draco! You're a good older brother."

"Just not as good as me," Harry put in.

Draco snorted. "Right, Snape."

The two glared at each other before Holly snapped, "Knock it off you two. You're upsetting the kitten."

"Sorry," they apologized.

Then Draco eyed Harry and said, "I can't believe we just apologized to our little sister. There's something wrong here."

"Got that right, Draco. We're pushovers."

"Boys!" Holly rolled her eyes, then went back to gently stroking the kitten, who was purring. The kitten was mostly white, with black patches on her back and one hind paw. She also had a black tail tip and an odd shaped black mark up her nose, like a wand with a black smudge on the end of it. What should I call you, little one? You remind me of a witch holding a wand, with that strange mark on your face. Perhaps it means you've a bit of your own magic, huh? Though all cats have a bit of the gift in them, at least that's what Mum always told me. She said cats touched the mystic force more easily than any other animal, which is why cats were always associated with witches and stuff. And magic brought you to me, in a way. She smiled down at the kitten, who had a hidden strength in her. Magic has marked you, Mum would say.

"Well? You have a name yet, Holl, or do you need help?" inquired Harry impatiently.

"Yes. Her name is Magik. Because of that mark there," she pointed to the odd wand shaped mark on the kitten's face. "And also because magic has marked her, like it has me."

"And every Squib needs a little Magik by her side," Draco quipped.

"But I'm spelling it the old-fashioned way," Holly explained. "With a 'k' instead of a 'c'. So people know it's name and not just the word."

"Good idea. You're smart, Holly." Harry praised.

"Of course she is, Snape. She's our sister. Why wouldn't she be smart? It's in her blood."

Holly smiled, happy that Draco had accepted her for herself at last. Now all she had to do was convince Severus to let her keep the kitten-her little bit of Magik-and she would be over the moon, as Healer Keegan would say.

Did you agree with the professors' punishment for the three students?

And how did you like the way the children are getting along?

Next: Severus stalks Throckmorton and tries to catch him inciting students to hurt squibs and Muggleborns. Will he succeed?

Thank you for all the awesome reviews and alerts, you're the best!

When the Falcon Hunts

When Severus returned from holding detention that evening, Holly chewed her lip nervously and gathered her courage to approach him after they had eaten supper in their quarters. Sometimes they ate in the Great Hall, with the rest of the staff, or with Narcissa and Draco, but mostly Severus preferred the peace and quiet of his own quarters, where he could eat leisurely and sparingly and without having his meal disturbed by angst-ridden hormonal teenagers. He spent the meal discussing subjects with his children and asking questions about their day.

Once the elves had taken their supper dishes and left a plate of sugared donuts, plus a pot of tea and cocoa for the children, Holly told Severus how well the kitten was doing. "I think she's almost all healed now, Severus." She indicated the kitten, who was sitting alertly in her cat bed, washing her face.

Severus eyed the small cat and nodded, pleased. "I believe you're right. You all ought to be very proud of yourselves, you did a very good job nursing her back to health."

Holly felt herself flush with pleasure. For the first time in her life, an adult male had said he was proud of her. A warm glow spread through her and she managed to look her guardian in the eye and ask, "Severus, since she doesn't belong to anyone, I was wondering if . . . I could keep her? I promise I'll take care of her and everything. Harry and Draco agreed that I should have her, since I was the one who noticed she was in trouble. I . . . I've called her Magik."

Severus gazed into the girl's sapphire eyes, so bright with hope and full of longing, and even though he didn't really need another pet in his quarters, although Silver wasn't truly a pet, he found he could not refuse her. The child hardly ever asked for anything, she was content with whatever he provided. In fact, this was the first time he could recall her actually asking for something for herself. But that's a good thing, it shows that she's starting to trust me, that she feels comfortable enough to start asserting herself, knowing I won't reject her the way Lucius did, he reminded himself. This was what he and Susan had hoped would occur eventually.

So he met her pleading eyes and said, "You've given her a name already?"

She nodded. "Yes. She needed one." She explained why she had chosen that particular name.

"A good choice. From what I have seen, Holly, you know how to care for this kitten properly, and if you can assure me you will continue to do so, then you may keep her."

"Oh, I will! I promise!" She was beaming. "Thank you, Severus. Thank you so much!"

Then, before he could blink, she was hugging him, curling up on his knee and throwing her small arms about his neck.

He remained still for a moment, then he patted her back and hugged her in return. "You're welcome, little one. And now, I think you ought to eat dessert and then take a bath and go to bed. Your kitten . . . Magik . . . may sleep with you if you would like."

She grinned and thanked him again and kissed his cheek, much to his amazement. He hadn't been hugged and kissed by a girl since Lily back in school. I think I had better get used to hugs and kisses, since that's how it seems little girls like to show their happiness, he thought, concealing his embarrassment with a soft cough. "You're welcome, Holly."

He glanced up to see Harry watching that little moment, his green eyes twinkling. "See, Holl. Didn't I tell you he'd let you keep her?"

"Oh? So you were in on this too, Harry?" Severus demanded, pretending to scowl.

But Harry knew he wasn't angry, and just laughed. "'Course, Dad. Holly needs a pet too, and I'm her big brother, so I can tell her how to outsmart you."

"Think you're pretty clever, don't you?"

"I am." His son said modestly.

"Smartass," Severus growled. "Eat dessert, Mr. Clever One, before I decide you ought to go to bed without it."

He didn't need to be told twice and neither did Holly, though for some reason she decided to eat hers sitting on the Potion Master's lap. Severus found he didn't mind, Harry used to sit with him that way until he was seven and decided he was too big for laps any more. Severus supposed that it was a little different with a girl, they apparently didn't mind being held, especially when one's father had just allowed them to keep a stray kitten.

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Healer Keegan, who still came every Tuesday and Wednesday for sessions with Holly, agreed that allowing Holly to keep Magik was a wonderful idea. "She needs something that's her own, Sev. A kitten is a great idea, especially one that she rescued. It'll give her self-confidence a boost and show her that she can make good decisions and with a familiar, she'll always have unconditional love. Have they bonded yet, do you know?"

Severus tapped the side of his finger along his chin thoughtfully. "I believe so, Sue. Although all three children took turns caring for the kitten, Holly was with her the most, and I would say that if she didn't bond with the cat then, she has now."

"Good. And if she saved the cat's life, that'll mean a good strong bond, and the stronger the better, since she's a Squib." Susan said, very pleased with how Holly was progressing and adjusting to her new family, including her surprising new half-brother. She had met Draco twice, and had suggested to his mother that perhaps he might benefit from some sessions also.

Narcissa had been startled. "But Draco has never been abused like Holly, Healer Keegan."

"There are many kinds of abuse, Mrs. Malfoy," Susan had pointed out softly. "You don't have to pummel a child with your fists or a belt to abuse him. Your husband's influence casts a long shadow, and I'm just suggesting that it might be a good way to erase some of damage he did to Draco."

"What sort of damage?"

"Well, your husband forced his views of the way a wizard from a pureblooded family ought to act and behave down your son's throat. He terrified Draco, threatening him with all sorts of curses, I'll bet. You do know he is afraid of his father?"

"Yes, but . . . how do you know what Lucius did to him? Did he tell you?"

Susan shook her head. "No. But he didn't need to. This isn't the first time I've dealt with this kind of thing. We have our own version of Death Eaters back where I come from, and I've worked with children of them before, those whose mother or father managed to get them away from their partner before something happened that scarred them for life. Plus, I'm an empath, and I can read auras and sense that Draco's is damaged by his tampering with dark magic."

"That was all his father's idea."

"I figured as much." Susan said grimly. "Well, I'd appreciate it if you'd consider my suggestion. I could have sessions with Draco as well as Holly and you could pay me the same as Professor Snape does."

"Thank you, Healer. I will think about it," Narcissa said.

Healer Keegan nodded, then retreated to Severus's quarters for her session with Holly. For one instant, her mouth tightened in a grim line, and she wished she had Lucius before her, so she could hex him good for all the awful things he had done to his children, robbing them of their childhoods without a shred of remorse.

Meanwhile, Narcissa's solicitor had contacted her, and agreed to forward the divorce papers to Lucius. She had resolved to wait and

see what his response was to them before going public with the news. She had also filed a request for sole custody of her son, though as yet the Ministry had not officially approved it.

Severus was now tutoring all three children, and happy to note that they all seemed to get along well now. Of course, there were the occasional spats, mostly between Harry and Draco, but for the most part, a friendship had developed between them, and that relieved the Potions Master to no end.

Harmony within his small family freed him to do some detective work of his own-as Dumbledore had asked him to weeks ago-and he resolved to begin gathering evidence against Throckmorton swiftly. Unlike when he had worked as a secret agent before, he did not need to rely only on himself to get the information he needed to prove that the bigoted professor was trying to warp the students' minds, encouraging them to persecute Squibs, Muggleborns, and Muggles with impunity. Now he was free to cultivate other resources, namely the students.

He chose two students from each House to be his unwitting eyes and ears in Throckmorton's class. Fred and George Weasley from Gryffindor-they had a penchant for pranks but were two of his best Advanced Potions students, and they regarded his odd request to 'monitor' the new professor as another fun prank. "I need you two to listen closely to what Professor Throckmorton tells you about certain Defensive spells and their targets in class, especially if he happens to mention anything about Dark curses and Squibs. If you happen to hear something odd or off, write down exactly what he says and the date and time and owl me it immediately. Oh, and don't forget to sign it."

"Sure, Professor. No problem." The twins had chorused, they did not particularly like the Defense professor, regarding him as a humorless cold bugger. Though Severus did not permit them to play pranks in his class, and had in fact given them detention for doing so in the past, he also allowed them the use of the potions lab to try several experiments, and made certain they were not killed in the process and the concoctions they developed really were harmless. They also

discovered that the strict professor had a wickedly keen sense of humor, and had offered tips for their best joke products.

He chose a seventh and a fifth year Slytherin from his own House, Steven Edgewood and Marcus Flint, and gave them the same instructions he had the twins. Both of them did not question him, they trusted him implicitly, and they too disliked Throckmorton for making disparaging remarks about Snape one class period.

From Ravenclaw he chose sprightly Amber McMillian, a sharp little witch who was very observant, she was a third year, and also Kendra Carruthers, that House's top potions student, a sixth year. "Above all, be discreet. Professor Throckmorton is not to know he is being observed," he cautioned them.

"Is this like an assignment from the Board of Governors, sir?" asked Amber.

"Yeah, are they looking for reasons to sack him?" queried Kendra.

"Perhaps, ladies," Snape said vaguely. "But do exercise caution."

"We will, sir. You can count on us." Amber reassured him, then added, softly, "You know, Cross wasn't lying when he told you that Throckmorton told us to go find someone to practice Defense on. He was a wicked git, but that much was true."

Severus nodded, his eyes gleaming. "I had figured that much out myself, Miss MacMillian. Keep it to yourself for the time being, however. Now be off, before you are late for your next class."

His last pair, from Hufflepuff, included third year Cedric Diggory, whose father was a known Ministry official and first year David Solomon, who had stood up for Filch and blew the whistle on Cross, allowing Dumbledore to collar the true perpetrator. He told them the same thing he had the others, and he knew both of them understood the seriousness of their assignment, though they did not question him like the Ravenclaws did. But David did tell Snape that Throckmorton had singled him out more than once, calling him a half-Muggle, and

humiliating him by making him the 'practice dummy' for his low level Defense spells.

Severus's mouth tightened. "You are a half-blood, correct, Solomon?"

"Yes, sir. My dad's a wizard but my mother's a Muggle. It's never mattered before, but Professor Throckmorton . . .he thinks it's a disgrace and he . . .likes to . . . make an example of me."

"Indeed. I need you to write down as many incidences as you can recall, Solomon. As well as anything else he does that seems . . .strange."

"He's right, sir. Throckmorton's, well, he's a bit crazed." Cedric said. "Went on for one whole period about the days when wizards cleansed their families of "undesirable members", about two centuries ago. It was really creepy, sir, and I don't know what it had to do with us learning Defense."

"It doesn't have anything to do with his class, Mr. Diggory. Except in his own twisted mind. Write that down as well, and the date, if you can recall it. Report back to me in two weeks with anything you have noticed. Tell no one else, however, what you are doing."

The two Hufflepuffs nodded and went on their way.

His network of student spies in place, he then moved to watching the professor himself after class was over whenever he could, using Concealment Charms and other magics to stalk Throckmorton unseen, taking note of where the professor went after supper was over, which was usually back to his quarters, or occasionally for a walk about the grounds.

Thus far, nothing Throckmorton did after class was anything suspicious, but that meant nothing. Severus knew the other wizard was aware Dumbledore did not trust him, and would keep a low profile for a time. But he also knew that Throckmorton was a proud individual, and he regarded his fellow professors as a lesser breed, which meant that eventually he would slip, and then Severus would have him. Until then, he would simply have to be patient.

Patience was a spy's greatest asset, and Severus could be very patient when he chose. The only thing that bothered him was that he could not enter Throckmorton's quarters without setting off the wards the other had set up against uninvited guests entering his domain. He was certain that things went on there that were illegal, otherwise why such strong wards? Severus himself did not ward his quarters so fanatically, and he was a former spy.

He pondered that dilemma for a few days before coming up with a solution. Oddly enough, it was one of the twins' joke products that inspired him. One of them had come up with something they called Seeker Eyes, which were balls charmed to look like eyes that followed a person's every move for about three hours, floating in the air above the target and yelling one of five insulting phrases at them. They gleefully informed Snape that they drove Percy crazy, especially when he was trying to study.

He had asked the twins if he could borrow a pair of eyes, and they had agreed, but then he had performed several alterations on them. He had removed the charm that caused the eyes to shout insults, for that would be of no use to him, replacing it instead with a charm that recorded whatever the eyes saw or heard, similar to a Muggle video camera, and he also gave the eyes a longer lasting levitation charm as well as a Chameleon Charm, making them able to blend into their surroundings. It was a lesser concealment charm, but one that did not activate wards put in place to detect invisibility and concealment magics, and Severus had often used it to spy on the Death Eaters back when he was Dumbledore's agent.

Severus called his finished product Spy Eyes, and lurked in the corridor outside Throckmorton's suite for an hour before the Defense professor returned and unlocked the door to his quarters. Throckmorton entered his quarters, swinging the door wide for a minute.

But a minute was plenty of time for the Spy Eyes to slip in behind him, and once they were inside, starting to monitor everything the teacher did while inside his quarters.

Severus smirked to himself. The Eyes were charmed to monitor for several days and then return to the master spy's office by a limited Retrieving Charm. Once they were returned to him, he could then extract whatever information they had gathered and then send them back again, if necessary.

Now all he had to do was wait, like a falcon circling his prey, and see what information his network brought.

* * * * *

By the time two weeks had gone by, Severus's spy network had reported several unusual incidents in Throckmorton's class. Amber McMillian wrote that in her second period class, Throckmorton had decided to divide up the class into two segments-purebloods and those with Muggle ancestry.

. . .then he said we were going to play a little game, and he said that the purebloods, of which I am one, were going to be allowed to boss around the Muggleborns and half-bloods. He said they had to do whatever we said, and if they refused or talked back to us, he'd give them detention. One of the girls in my year, Shannon Kelly, said she wasn't going to do anything like that, that it wasn't school policy, and Throckmorton got right in her face and shouted, "In my class, my word is law, young lady, and you shall do whatever I say without question, or else suffer for it."

Shannon, she's a Gryff, sir, said then she'd leave and Throckmorton said she was to report to him for detention, then he took thirty points and said he'd fail her if she spoke to him in that tone again, and then Shan left. We were all kind of shocked, we never had a professor scream at any of us like that before, or tell us to do things like that before.

The rest of the lesson, he made us purebloods order around our classmates, telling them to kneel to us and scrub our shoes and the floor and it was awful, sir. But we were kind of scared to cross him, he kept walking around and looking at us with this scary look on his face-worse than yours, sir, because none of us were misbehaving. And whenever one of us told a Muggleborn to do something, he got this

weird expression in his eyes-like satisfaction. I think . . . I think he was enjoying us telling them what to do.

And our homework that night was to read up on the origins of the Pureblood Superiority Act, which was passed in the 1300's and wasn't repealed until 1806.

Hope this helps, sir.

Amber McMillian

Severus felt ill when he read that, for Throckmorton's little game was nothing more than an exercise in prejudice.

David Solomon also reported that he had given the wrong date for the founding of the Auror Department in Britain, and Throckmorton had made him stand in front of the room wearing a sign saying I Am A Poor Scholar and Also A Snitch and letting some of his classmates mock him and taunt him for the entire period.

But when Ashby Allen, who's a pureblood Ravenclaw, got an answer wrong, all Throckmorton said was "Next time read the book" and that's it. I know sometimes some of the professors have students they favor, but this isn't like that. He picks on me and all the other kids who are Muggleborn or half-bloods in my class. He calls us "halfings" or "two bits", I'm not sure what those names refer to but, I know enough to know they aren't nice.

The Potions Master gritted his teeth upon reading those derogatory terms, which were old names for half-bloods and Muggleborns, referring to the fact that a half-blood was demeaned by having Muggle blood in their veins, and was thus "half" a wizard, while a "two-bit" was a Muggleborn, who because of their ordinary ancestry was worth about "two bits" or fifty cents in American parlance. The insults had gone out of fashion over a century ago, being replaced by the more familiar "Mudblood", but Severus knew of them, having studied the more obscure branches of magical history.

Cedric's report was even more chilling.

Dear Professor Snape,

You told me to keep an eye out for anything unusual in Throckmorton's class. Well, last week he had us studying up on Dark curses, all the curses they used to use back during medieval times and the sixteen hundreds, and most of them weren't used by dark wizards, sir, they were used to punish those of Muggle blood who "strayed from their place".

Sir, they were awful, nothing short of torture, and he made us read a whole unit of them and then write a paper on the best ways to curse a Muggleborn, only he said an enemy, but I could read between the lines, and I know he really meant Muggleborn. What kind of professor tells a student to write about something like that, sir?

He didn't even teach us any counters to those spells, and I did some research of my own and found at least five countercurses and learned that several of those spells are now outlawed and anyone caught using them will be sent to Azkaban.

One other thing, Throckmorotn runs his class like it was a kingdom, and he's the king. We have to bow to him when we enter and leave and if we forget he takes points and gives us detention.

Sincerely,

Cedric Diggory

Subverting the students by teaching them the old rituals are we, Throckmorton? Under the cover of teaching them history, no doubt. Severus sneered, then tucked Diggory's parchment away with the others. When he had gotten two statements from each of them and the report from the Spy Eyes, he would bring the information to Dumbledore and let the Headmaster see just what kind of person he had hired to teach this year.

The owl he received from the twins was yet another black mark.

. . .He had us practicing hexes and Disarming Charms upon a set of cloth targets, professor, only they weren't just faceless figures, they

were dressed like people. There was a woman, a child, a man, most of them wearing Muggle clothing . . .we know what that looks like since our Dad brings home Muggle stuff all the time.

And every time somebody wrecked a target with a spell, Throckmorton cheered and said that was the way to teach those miserable parasites a lesson. He gave one of the Slytherins ten points for blowing one up totally.

His two Slytherins also reported that Throckmorton continually favored purebloods, calling them "my lords and ladies" and allowing them special privileges, like extra time on tests and breaks and things like that.

He says, sir, that's how it was done back when he taught at Durmstrang, that they knew how to appreciate a student's background there, and he went on and on about how we ought to be proud of our ancestry and not . . .not dilute it . . .pollute it. . .something like that by marrying beneath us. Flint wrote, adding that he thought Throckmorton was supposed to be teaching Defense, not giving a lecture on dating or whatever. I get enough of that from my family, sir, I sure as hell don't need it from him too. Sorry, sir, don't mean to badmouth to you, but I wanted to learn how to defend myself, not get lectured for an hour and half about suitable bloodlines.

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose and heaved a sigh. He had only to wait for the Spy Eyes to report back and that should provide the clincher to Throckmorton's unsuitability as a teacher. Then there was also the way he treated Severus, with barely disguised animosity, though the feeling was mutual. Lately he had taken to making tasteless jokes about half-bloods while at dinner, even though none of the staff found them very funny.

Severus kept his temper, though there were times over the past weeks that he wished he were fifteen again and could hex the damn man right through the castle wall.

Throckmorton had even approached Narcissa one day and told her she ought to go back to her husband. "A woman's place is with her husband, lady. You never should have left, you or your son."

Narcissa had promptly told him to mind his own business. "What is between me and my husband is none of your concern, sir. Now I'll thank you to keep your nose out of my business. Good day, professor!" And with that, Narcissa had sailed off, pretending she was her grandmother Irma, who could stop a battalion with a glare.

"He made me so furious I wanted to draw my wand, Severus. Either that or slap him into next week."

"I know the feeling, believe me," Severus commiserated that night, in a private supper with their children in his quarters. "I think the Headmaster hired him out of desperation, because a first year would make a better teacher."

"I agree. I hope he doesn't last another year, Severus. I'd rather not have him teach Draco anything."

"Oh, I doubt if he will, Cissa," said Severus mysteriously, and the witch cast him a sharp look.

My Spy Eyes ought to be back tonight, and then we shall see what Throckie has been up to behind closed doors. He fought to keep from smirking like a mischievous five-year-old. But he was quite eager to see what the Spy Eyes had recorded, and he hoped they contained some evidence of forbidden spellcraft, something that would point to his involvement with the Dark Arts, which given his background and rampant prejudice, Severus did not doubt he was steeped in. But he needed hard evidence, not mere speculation. A spy dealt in facts, not rumors.

"What makes you so sure, Severus?"

He shrugged. "Let us say I have an instinct about these things, Narcissa," was all he said.

He took a quick glance at the clock upon the mantle and noted it was drawing close to the childrens' bedtime. He turned to see what they were doing, and found Draco sprawled half-asleep on the sofa, Holly writing in her journal, and Harry thumbing through a magazine.

"Holly, Harry, time for bed," he beckoned to them and they said goodbye and goodnight to Narcissa and a sleepy Draco, who then departed for their own apartments.

Holly went into her room to get ready for bed, finding Magik curled up asleep on her pillow. She smiled and went to stroke the kitten before getting into her nightgown and sleep socks, which she always wore to bed, since it could be chilly down in this part of the castle. She put her blue journal on her nightstand, just in case she needed to get to it in a hurry.

Then she went to go and brush her teeth, only to discover that her brother had gotten there first. "Rats!" she muttered, tapping on the door. "Harry, you almost done?"

She heard the sound of water running, a muffled exclamation, then the unmistakable sounds of retching and gagging.

"Harry? Are you okay?"

"No . . .go away, Holl . . ." came her brother's soft groan.

Holly whirled and ran down to her father's room. "Severus, come quick, I think Harry's sick."

Severus appeared immediately in the doorway, looking both alarmed and annoyed. "What is it, Holly? I'm working . . ." he trailed off when he saw how pale she was, then asked her to repeat what she had said, he hadn't caught it.

"Harry's sick. I think he's throwing up."

"Stay here," Severus ordered, heading down to the bathroom. He knocked once, calling, "Harry, what's wrong?"

"Dad? My stomach . . ."

Severus unlocked the door and entered the bathroom to find his son pale and sweating, clutching his stomach. "How long ago did this start, son?"

"My stomach started feeling gross after dinner, but I just started puking a few minutes ago."

Severus felt his forehead, noting there was a slight fever. He quickly performed a diagnostic. "Hmm. Some sort of stomach flu, I believe. Well, it's bed for you. And a Stomach Soother."

Harry groaned. "I don't think I can swallow anything, Dad."

"You won't have to, I'll spell them into you." Severus said, then he helped Harry to bed, summoning the required potion and also a Fever Reducer and spelling them directly into Harry's stomach, a procedure which was only taught to would-be Healers and Potions Masters who showed an aptitude for such advanced magic.

"How's that, better?"

Harry nodded.

"Try and get some rest. I'll leave a light on and my door open in case you need me," Severus said quietly, stroking his son's hair away from his forehead. "Don't hesitate to call me, Harry. I don't care what time it is."

"Okay." Harry shut his eyes.

Severus remained there until he was sure his son was asleep, then he rose and went to cast a disinfecting charm over the bathroom and himself, knowing such things would spread like wildfire unless he took precautions and the last thing he needed was to get sick. Or have Holly sick as well.

He went to check on her and found her sitting on her bed, holding her kitten, who was purring sleepily. "Time for bed, Holly."

"Severus, is Harry going to be all right?"

"Yes, he has a stomach flu, but he should be better in two days or so. That type of illness usually doesn't last any longer than that. But I want you to stay away from him for the next day or so, little one. You'll catch it, else."

She made a face. "Aww, poor Harry. I hate being sick."

"I don't know of many children who like it," Severus remarked, then tucked her in and bid her goodnight.

Then he returned to his room, where he was examining the Spy Eyes, extracting the information they had gathered and putting it into a Pensieve so he could view it easily.

Unfortunately, he barely had a chance to view the eyes first recording, that of Throckmorton at his desk, scribbling frantically on a piece of parchment, when he was pulled out of the Pensieve by Harry calling him.

That set the tone for the rest of the night, as Severus was kept busy tending his very sick son, who was stricken with nausea and diarrhea as well as a nasty fever, which Severus discovered did not respond well to a standard Fever Reducer, requiring him to brew a stronger one. He also gave his son several other drafts to reduce the cramping and nausea and diarrhea, as well as making him drink several sips of water mixed with a potion called NutriLite, designed to restore essential minerals and antibodies lost through dehydration.

Harry could just about keep that down, and Severus remained with him through the rest of the night, snatching cat naps, his information-gathering put hold until Harry was well again.

When dawn broke and his son was still not well, Severus Flooed Albus and told him he would need to find a substitute for his classes, Harry was sick and he wished to remain home with him. Albus said that was fine, and hoped Harry was well soon and to contact Poppy if his condition worsened.

Severus managed to eat breakfast with Holly before returning to Harry's bedside and trying to coax him into eating a bowl of broth and some crackers.

At first, Harry refused. "What's the use of eating, if I'm only gonna sick up, Dad?"

"Because it is better to have something to vomit up than nothing, Harry," Severus pointed out, and something about the way he said that made Harry think he was speaking from experience.

"How would you know? You're hardly ever sick," he said petulantly, accepting the spoonful of broth Severus held out to him.

"I've been sick a few times, and trust me when I say it makes a difference. Swallow another spoonful." Severus coaxed, suppressing a wince. If you only knew how sick I was after the Cruciatus Curse, son . . . or after one of those meetings when Riddle brought out innocent women and children to "play with" and test new pain curses on . . . thank Merlin that I don't ever have to endure another meeting again now that my days as a spy are finished forever . . .

He decided to send Holly over to stay with Narcissa for the day, rather than risk exposing her to the virus any more than she had already been. Narcissa assured him she would be happy to let Holly spend some time with her and Draco, and so Holly took her school books (Severus had written out assignments for her to complete) and Magik and went down to the Malfoy suite.

Severus spent the rest of the day nursing his son and brewing extra healing potions, for he had no idea where Harry had picked this up, and he had a feeling that Poppy was going to have need of his potions, since such viruses tended to travel through the student body like wildfire.

Sure enough, Madam Pomfrey Flooed him that afternoon, just as Harry was beginning to feel a little better, to ask him for the same Fever Reducer and Stomach Soothers plus Anti-Diarrhea Drafts he had been giving his child. "I have six students here with this stomach

flu, Severus, and I could really use some of your potions right about now, if you feel up to brewing them. How is Harry?"

"He's recovering. And I made extra, Poppy, I'll bring them over. Do you need me to help you administer them? Does your assistant know how spell a draft into a patient's stomach?"

"Not yet, that's a skill she has yet to master, Severus. I would greatly appreciate your help."

"On my way." He summoned a house elf to watch Harry while he went over to the infirmary to help Poppy.

Most of the students were in the beginning stages of the virus, and the potions helped them immensely. Severus was finished rather quickly, and returned to find Harry sleeping peacefully, and the house elf, Twylla, reported that he had eaten some soup Severus left and drank some water before going to sleep.

"Very good. That's what I had hoped. Thank you, Twylla, you may go."

"You are most welcome, Master Snape." The elf bowed and then vanished.

At last Severus returned to the Pensieve and managed to look over the various images. He noted that Throckmorton spent an inordinate amount of time writing letters and sending them off with various owls, as he did not own one.

He also kept practicing certain wand movements and chanting a spell that Severus was unfamiliar with, but was pretty certain was a conjuring spell of some kind, meant to call up something. Knowing Throckmorton, whatever it was was surely unpleasant.

There were also several books upon Throckmorton's shelf that Severus knew were texts of Dark magic, books that had been banned in Britain for years, yet Throckmorton had them upon his shelf right next to supposed Defense texts. The sheer arrogance of the man

astounded Severus. No wonder he warded his room, if this was what he displayed in it for all to see.

There was also a list that the professor kept checking, Severus saw it had several names upon it, including his own and his children's, as well as several other students, all of them having some Muggle ancestry. Snape's eyes narrowed. What sort of list is that? A list of those he wishes to get rid of? A hit list, as the Muggles would say?

There was a list of purebloods too, and on this one, Throckmorton had written next to some names-has potential, will be an asset, has a quick temper but strong in magic, or has tendencies to sympathize with Mudbloods and other trash.

It was then that Severus understood what Throckmorton was doing. He was not just teaching a class, he was recruiting likely candidates for the Death Eaters. The letters Throckmorton wrote were not ones that made any real sense, and Severus knew they were coded, and he would not be able to decode them without having one.

Still, what he had so far was enough to get Throckmorton unceremoniously sacked. The student affidavits were strong testimony and Throckmorton could not say they all lied, nor that one House was causing all the trouble, since all the Houses were involved.

Severus allowed himself a quiet smile of victory. The falcon had sighted his prey and was now moving in for the kill, and the rabbit remained unaware. He placed the Pensieve and the letters next to each other and Flooed Dumbledore.

* * * * *

Little did the Potions Master know, that Throckmorton had just sent out an urgent letter to the one he worked for that same night.

It was a single sheet of white parchment with the following sentence upon it:

They have come here, in case you were wondering.

He then sent it off with a fast barn owl.

A/N: Thanks so very much for all the awesome reviews and alerts and all! It really makes my day to see you all enjoying this so much!

But if you're looking for something slightly different, I have a new story up called Irresistible Chemistry--with a young Sev, Lily, James, and Petunia as well as Sirius and Regulus Black. It's a drama/romance where things turn out differently for our favorite Mauraunders and Potions Master and Lily. Please check it out, if you would! It's not your typical pairings at all, you get to see different sides of all the characters eventually.

A Necessary Humiliation

Albus lifted his head from the Pensieve Severus had brought to him and his eyes were no longer merry and twinkling. Instead they were glittering with barely suppressed fury. "I have given Victor a second chance here, a chance to redeem himself from the debacle he made of his career at Durmstrang and this is how he repays me? By filling students' heads with Death Eater propaganda, by encouraging pureblood supremacy, hatred, and intolerance? After the last discussion I had with him regarding Holly, I would have thought he would heed me and realize that such ideals lead only to ruin. I thought that after we snapped Cross's wand he would note that such practices are not tolerated in my school and adjust his attitude and curriculum accordingly. It would seem, based on your findings and the statements of these students, Severus, that I was mistaken."

The elder wizard looked suddenly tired and worn, his eternal optimism blunted. It made Severus angry to see his mentor that way, and he said, "Don't blame yourself for believing that skulking pretender. He played us all for fools."

Dumbledore looked at his Potions Master, whom he loved like a son, and said shrewdly, "All save you, Severus. You never trusted him. I did, if only for a short period of time, and look at what he has done."

"Albus, who was that always told me to forgive myself for my mistakes and learn from them? I believe it was a certain Headmaster. I would suggest you take your own advice, Albus. The important thing is that we discovered what he was doing to the students in time to stop him before he subverted them to his cause. Now that we know his agenda, we can take steps to bring him down."

The twinkle returned to the Headmaster's eyes. "Indeed, my boy. Forgive me for wallowing in guilt. With this information, I have grounds to sack him, and more I can question him under Veritaserum, as his actions have placed the lives of my students in jeopardy, and he has violated the contract I made him sign at the beginning of the term."

"I can bring him up under formal charges of child endangerment and willful intent to harm a child as well," Severus said. "If word ever got out to the press about what Throckmorton has done . . . I wouldn't be the only parent out for his blood."

Dumbledore's eyes gleamed. "It would be most unfortunate," he agreed slyly. "With so much pressure put upon me by the parents, I would have to call an inquest, and then question him to determine the veracity of his innocence. And if he were found guilty, I could then dismiss him, and perhaps get him a seat in Azkaban as well."

"Such a shame, that he made such poor decisions," Snape said, a wicked gleam in his eyes.

Dumbledore pulled out a sheet of parchment from his desk. "Normally I would hesitate to do this, but in this case, it is a necessary humiliation. Will an anonymous tip work to Prophet, do you think?"

Severus nodded. Then he intoned a spell to copy all the student affidavits and handed them to the Headmaster to put in the envelope with a letter explaining what they were, signed A Very Concerned Individual.

* * * * *

Within three days, there was a new headline in the Daily Prophet. It read-New Hogwarts Professor Corrupt! Victor Throckmorton's Hidden Agenda-Are Your Children At Risk? The article detailed several eyewitness accounts of Throckmorton's classes and teaching methods, stressing the superiority of purebloods and disregarding or humiliating half-bloods and Muggleborns. It was even speculated that Throckmorton had former ties to the Death Eaters.

The paper was delivered in the morning at breakfast. About three hours later, Dumbledore received his first owl from an outraged parent. After that it was like a deluge.

Throckmorton was protesting loudly, claiming it was all false accusations by some student who disliked him and wished to paint

him as a villain. "Lies and slander!" he raged at the latest staff meeting. "What are you going to do about this, Dumbledore?"

"Do? My dear fellow, there is only one thing I can do."

"What is that?" demanded Throckmorton furiously.

"Prove to the parents and the public that they are wrong, of course."

"How?"

Severus fought to keep from smiling. The arrogant fool had walked neatly into their trap.

"By conducting an inquiry, of course," Albus said, giving the professor a slightly befuddled smile.

"What? You cannot truly expect me to submit to questioning like a common criminal!" exploded Throckmorton.

"If you are innocent, Throckmorton, then why would you not wish to have your name cleared?" Severus asked sharply.

Throckmorton whirled on him. "Stay out of this, Snape!" Flecks of spit edged the corners of his thin mouth and he glared at Severus as if he wished to roast him over a slow fire. "Keep your interfering, pointed, inferior nose out of things that don't concern you."

Severus met him glare for glare.

The other teachers watched the confrontation with varying degrees of alarm and satisfaction. Throckmorton had not endeared himself to the staff by mocking their Potions Master and looking down his nose at the rest of them, and nearly all of the professors were of the opinion that the rumors were probably true and wanted to see the smug man get his just comeuppance.

"On the contrary, Professor, this concerns me greatly, for I will soon have a child attending here, and I would not want my son to be influenced by a dark wizard."

Throckmorton looked as if he wanted to jump over the table and throttle Severus. "You dare accuse me?"

Severus sneered at him. "Only the guilty fear the truth, Throckmorton. If you will not submit to an inquiry, then you are guilty."

"Ridiculous!" sputtered the other, trying to recover. "You have no proof, only hearsay."

"Actually, that is not so," Albus said. "A Pensieve has recently come into my possession. It revealed some very interesting things about your, ah, nocturnal habits, Victor."

Throckmorton went pale. "More lies!" he blustered.

Dumbledore sighed. "You cannot use false memories in a Pensieve, Victor. They will not register. But if you think I am mistaken, why don't we take a walk down to your quarters?"

The professor's eyes darted about, clearly panicked, but trying not to show it. "I have nothing to hide, Dumbledore!" he bluffed.

"Good. Then you won't mind if I have a peek inside, now will you?"

Trapped, Throckmorton had no choice but to agree.

Dumbledore rose and escorted the Defense teacher to his quarters, followed by Severus.

"Why is he coming?"

"To see for myself if you are what you claim," answered the Potions Master coldly.

They reached the Defense professor's quarters and Throckmorton disabled the wards and started to enter the room. "Let me just tidy up a bit . . ."

"That won't be necessary, Victor. Your apartments can't be any worse than the student dormitories," said Albus, and he pushed open the door and entered Throckmorton's chambers.

He quickly located the shelf of forbidden texts and the lists that had been in the Pensieve. "Such interesting reading material you have here, Victor," the Headmaster said, he could have been talking about the weather.

"Uh . . . I have them for study, so I can teach students how to deflect dark curses," Throckmorton said, sweating now.

"How convenient," Severus mocked.

"You cannot talk, Snape! For you were almost convicted of being a dark wizard yourself ten years ago!" cried Throckmorton triumphantly.

"Wrong, Throckie. I was never convicted of anything. I was a spy, working undercover to ferret out those who were Death Eaters. Such as yourself!" Severus moved then, swift as a snake striking, and grabbed Throckmorton by the left wrist. He shoved the other wizard's sleeve up, revealing an arm scarred by numerous thin white lines. "Blood rituals." Severus hissed, his lip curling. Then he flipped the arm over, despite the other man's attempts to pull free, and there was the Dark Mark, the skull and the snake. "And the truth is revealed at last! What were you doing at the meetings, Throckie? Certainly a hell of a lot more than watching!"

Throckmorton struggled to reclaim his arm from Snape's grasp. "Release me, you bloody cretin! You have no right to interrogate me!"

"No, but I do," Albus interjected, his voice hard. Once again power crackled about him. "You have betrayed our agreement, Victor Throckmorton, you swore upon your wand that you would do no harm to my students, and here I discover you have been tutoring them in the ways of the dark path!"

Throckmorton shrank from him, but managed to say, "You have kept them ignorant of their blood heritage, deprived them of the power that is theirs by right, Dumbledore. They are meant to rule, not be friends

with half-blood and Mudblood trash! My teachings are designed to help those who deserve it find their true potential."

"As dark wizards? Minions for your Dark Lord?" Severus demanded, shaking the other sharply. "Magic is might and the mighty shall rule?"

"Yes! And we will rule, half-blood scum! And you and yours shall be crushed beneath us!" There was a burning rage in the other wizard's face now, he scorched the Potions Master with his contempt and hatred, but Severus held firm.

"Victor Throckmorton, I charge you with willful intent to harm children under your care, and consorting with dark magic, and being in league with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named," Severus announced. "How shall you answer these charges?"

"Go bugger yourself, Snape!" He twisted his arm free and went to leave the room, but Dumbledore cast a spell over the door and Throckmorton was thrown backwards. Before he could recover, Albus snapped a Binding Charm, and pocketed the other's wand.

"My office, Severus," he ordered crisply.

Severus levitated the other into the air and they departed the Defense professor's quarters, going up to the Headmaster's office.

There, Severus shoved Throckmorton into a chair while Albus Flooed the Auror Department and requested an Auror team be sent to witness an inquiry.

Two minutes later, Williamson and Shackbolt stepped through the fireplace.

"Caught another one, did you, sir?" Williamson said, nodding at Throckmorton, whose sleeve was still rolled up and the Mark visible.

"This was my Defense Against the Dark Arts professor," Dumbledore stated. "But after this testimony, I shall no longer be employing him. Severus, if you would fetch some Veritaserum?"

Severus nodded, and summoned a vial with a casual gesture. He approached Throckmorton, vial in hand.

The other wizard fought against his bonds, but it was futile. He tried to avoid opening his mouth, but Severus was experienced in giving reluctant children medicine they hated and simply pinched the other's nostrils together and pulled the other's head back. "Open and swallow, Throckmorton."

The sorcerer's eyes blazed, but he stubbornly kept his mouth closed until the lack of air forced him to gasp for breath, and then Severus administered the three drops of truth elixir and stroked his throat to make him swallow.

Throckmorton's face went slack and his eyes glassy as the potion took effect.

"Headmaster, you may begin," Severus said, for Veritaserum worked almost immediately.

Dumbledore began, establishing that Victor Throckmorton had an unsavory reputation at Durmstrang for whipping a child nearly unconscious, which went beyond the bounds of even that school's policy of discipline, though they did practice corporal punishment.

Williamson and Shacklebolt's faces twisted in disgust as the questioning continued, and it was revealed that Throckmorton was indeed a Death Eater, who had been sent to Hogwarts by Lucius Malfoy to scout potential new recruits for their cause. His mission had been to introduce the pureblood children to the power that was their birthright, and show them the path to true power.

Under the drug's influence, Throckmorton freely admitted encouraging Cross to torment Filch, and confirming all that the children had said about him. He detested those not of pure blood with a deep abiding hatred, Squibs especially.

"That's enough to guarantee you a nice long stay in Azkaban, traitor," remarked Shacklebolt.

"Yeah we don't take kindly to some racist trash filling kids heads with that kind of pureblood superiority crap," Williamson stated, glaring at Throckmorton viciously.

"You may take him as soon as I finish filling out the forms for his termination of employment," Dumbledore said quietly, removing Throckmorton's wand from his pocket and setting it on the corner of his desk while he sat down and began to write out the form.

"As of this day, March 2nd, I formally dismiss you from my staff upon grounds of gross misconduct . . ."Albus began sternly, scribbling rapidly.

He had just finished signing his name with a flourish, and motioned for the two Aurors to come and sign their names as witnesses, when Throckmorton shuddered violently.

"What? Albus, he's having some kind of fit," Severus declared. He moved to see what was causing Throckmorton to react like that, and in the next instant, Throckmorton's body shimmered, twisted, and became a raven, freeing himself from the Incarcerous Spell.

It flew at Severus, its sword-sharp beak stabbing at the Potion Master's eyes, forcing the other wizard to stumble back and cover his eyes with a hand.

"Snape, look out!" yelled Williamson, trying to Stun the bird, but it was too close quarters and he missed.

The raven cawed at him, then flew down and plucked his wand off the desk and flew out the door with it.

Williamson and Shacklebolt threw Stunning spells after him, but none of them landed.

"Animagus!" Severus spat, furious at his oversight.

He bolted after the fleeing raven, followed by the others.

Throckmorton flew through the gargoyle portal, which unfortunately was not set to keep visitors from leaving the office, only entering, and then he was in the Entrance Hall, where bunches of students were milling, having just been let out of class for lunch.

He felt his wings start to wobble and he quickly landed and transformed back, breaking Dumbledore's binding had weakened him considerably, enough so he couldn't maintain his Animagus form. He knew he didn't have much time, the others would be coming for him, and he glanced about swiftly, panicking.

The students were staring at him and then he spotted Harry, Draco, and their accursed Squib sister making their way towards the hall.

"Professor McGonagall said Dad went with Dumbledore to his office, something to do with Throckmorton, the nasty bugger," Harry was telling Draco.

"I hope they're gonna sack him," Holly added. "He's an awful man, worse than Lucius." Then she looked at Harry and asked, "Do you think Dad will mind if Narcissa takes us to Hogsmeade for ice cream?"

"No, probably not," Harry answered, then yelped as something knocked him down. "Hey! What the heck. . . ?"

Holly screamed as two hard hands grabbed her and crushed her against a set of indigo robes, and a familiar hateful voice hissed, "Before I'm sacked, I'll see you in hell, little Squib brat! Be still or I'll hex your arms and legs off."

Holding the whimpering little girl under his arm, Throckmorton began running for the entrance.

Harry was helped to his feet by Draco, who shouted, "Harry, quick, get your dad! He's got Holly!"

"What? Who does?" Harry's first thought was Lucius.

"Thick-moron!" yelled Draco, using the name the children had coined for the Defense teacher one day. Then he started to sprint after the teacher. "Hey, put my sister down, you bloody bounder!" His practice wand was in his hand, though he didn't really know any offensive spells. Still, he wasn't about to allow the scum to kidnap his little sister without trying to stop him.

Harry was just about to run over to the gargoyle statue, when it burst open and his father and Dumbledore and two other wizards he didn't know raced out of it.

"Dad, he's got Holly!"

"Damn it!" Severus swore, his heart freezing. "Where did he go, Harry?"

"Outside, he grabbed Holly and ran away with her, Dad. And Draco's trying to catch them!" Harry reported.

Severus swore. This was all he needed. He sprinted through the doors and saw Throckmorton dragging a struggling Holly down the path towards the Forbidden Forest, and Draco racing after them.

Severus shot a Stunning hex at him but Throckmorton ducked at the last second, whirling about to face him. He had Holly pinned to his chest like a shield, his wand pointed directly at her throat. "Not another step, Snape! Unless you want your precious Squib daughter to become a human torch. All it takes is one little word and she'll go up like a candle on Midwinter night!"

Holly whimpered, utterly petrified, tears rolling down her cheeks.

Severus halted immediately, and so did Draco. "Let her go, Throckie. Put her down and you can walk away."

By then Williamson, Shackbolt, and Dumbledore had caught up to them also, but all of them halted, wands out, when they saw that Throckmorton was holding a child hostage.

"That won't help you, Victor," Dumbledore said quietly. "Release Severus's daughter and it will go easy with you."

Throckmorton spat at the Headmaster, his eyes wild. "Back off, all of you, or I'll kill her. You know I will, Dumbledore! What's one less Squib in the world?" There was a maniacal gleam in his eyes and his wand jabbed Holly in the neck painfully.

She shuddered, and implored Severus desperately with her eyes. Help me! Please!

The pleading desperation in the sapphire eyes nearly broke his heart, but Severus dared not cast anything while Holly remained within Throckmorton's hold. "Victor, if you release her, I'll drop the charges," he persuaded, stalling for time. If only there were no Anti-Apparition wards active, he could Apparate Holly out of the other wizard's arms. Think, Severus! There must be a way to make the bastard release her.

And then he recalled the one other member of the Snape family that had yet to appear on the scene.

Severus whistled sharply, praying the great wolf was close to the school, and not hunting deep within the forest. Silver usually returned from his hunt at this time, and the Potions Master prayed he had not deviated from that schedule.

All of the teachers, Aurors, and even Throckmorton and Draco looked at him as if he had gone mad.

But Holly's eyes glowed with hope, for she knew what the whistle meant.

A few seconds later, Snape caught something gray moving out of the corner of his eye, running with huge bounding leaps over the grass, right behind Throckmorton. He gave no indication that the wolf was coming, however, instead fixing his gaze upon his daughter and her captor.

Throckmorton was sneering and laughing. "What was that, Snape? Trying to conjure a spell with music? Too bad it didn't work, but then you've not the gift of the spellsingers." He backed away slowly, his wand against Holly's throat.

Silver slowed as he approached the crowd of wizards, trying to puzzle out why Severus had summoned him. The big wolf smelled hatred and fear and desperation, and the fur rose on his back and he bared his teeth silently.

Then he saw Throckmorton, whom he hated, and the other wizards standing before him, hesitant and unmoving. And then he smelled Holly-and the girl's fear hit him like a slap.

An instant later he was airborne, springing silently at the dark wizard, his teeth closing on Throckmorton's shoulder, knocking the tall wizard down.

"Holly!" Severus called, trying to see his daughter in the tangle of robes and legs and wolf.

Holly screamed, but more from shock than actual pain, for Throckmorton had cushioned her fall. She tore free from his arms, since he was fighting to get Silver away from her, and managed to crawl away from the wolf and the wizard upon the ground.

Silver was snarling horribly, tearing at Throckmorton's arm, and the dark wizard was screaming and kicking at the big wolf.

"Severus!" Holly sobbed, running to him and hugging him.

"Holly, are you all right?"

"Yes, he . . .he . . .didn't hurt me, just scared me," she managed to say through her tears.

Severus held her close and murmured, "Thank you, Merlin!"

Suddenly there came a red flash and a yelp from the wolf and Harry cried out. "No! Silver!"

Throckmorton shoved the limp form of the wolf off of himself and staggered to his feet, panting and holding his arm, which was bleeding badly from Silver's attack. He muttered a healing charm and the wound closed. He kicked the wolf's unconscious body viciously and snarled, "Take that, you bastard animal!"

"Leave Silver alone, you bloody creep!" shouted Harry.

Severus set Holly down and whispered, "Stay by your brothers." Then he started forward, his face set in grim lines, his black eyes promising swift revenge.

Several students had come outside, drawn by the commotion and upon seeing the furious look upon Snape's face and the way he was advancing upon their hated Defense teacher, began clapping and yelling, "Give it to him good, Snape! Mop the ground with him! Kick his arse, sir!"

Harry was hanging onto Holly's arm and shrieking, "Go, Dad, nail his coward arse!"

"Yeah, kick him all the way across the ocean back to wherever he came from!" Holly was yelling as well, flanked by Harry on one side and Draco on the other.

"And stick your wand up his bloody arse too!" added Draco, repeating something Lucius had once threatened to do to a stupid Ministry official.

"Draco Anthony Malfoy! You don't use such language, am I clear!"

Draco yelped as Narcissa grabbed his ear. "Ow! Mother, please!"

"Honestly, I don't know where you pick up those vulgar phrases," she scolded.

"Father said that one." Draco said sulkily, rubbing his ear. "Now let's watch Severus smear Throck-Bock-the-Chicken all over, okay? You can wash out my mouth later."

"Don't think I won't." Narcissa snorted, then she too turned to watch the duel. "Hex him good, Severus!" she cried, then gasped. "Merlin, did I just say that?"

The children grinned at each other, then watched avidly as Severus stalked Throckmorton across the lawn.

"Well, Throckie, you've been waiting the chance to duel me since our first meeting, wouldn't you say?" Severus inquired silkily. "Here's your chance, you vile sadistic child abuser."

Throckmorton smiled eagerly. "Yes, let us see who is the better combat master, Snape, you half-blood pansy-arsed whelp!" he pointed his wand and intoned a Blasting Curse.

Severus deflected it with a lazy counterclockwise twist, sending the curse bouncing off to explode on the lawn far from the school. "We'll see all right, Throckmorton. See you on the ground with your tail between your legs like a whipped puppy. Arciae auriae!"

A storm of hail shot out of Snape's wand, striking Throckmorton in the face and the chest, sending him staggering backwards, chanting a Shield Charm frantically. Frost rimmed his hair and robes and he shivered, glaring daggers at the other wizard.

"A bit slow are you? Tsk! Tsk! Looks like you didn't pay attention when your teacher taught reflexes and tactics, eh?" sneered Severus, then followed up his Ice Storm with a Gust of Wind Hex that threw the other wizard a good six feet across the lawn.

Throckmorton climbed to his feet, aching and furious that twice now Snape had been quicker than he was to cast. "Incendio maximus!" he shouted, and a fireball exploded from his wand and hurled at Snape.

The spectators gasped in horror as the fireball slammed into the shield Severus threw up.

The Potions Master staggered, but kept his shield up despite the deadly heat of the fire, then chanted a quick "Aguamenti maxima!"

Water gushed from his wand and put out the blaze surrounding him, and Severus stepped free of his shield, wand at the ready.

"Is that the best you've got, lackey? Really, I thought you were tough! A fifth year could do a better job."

Throckmorton waved his wand and summoned up a swarm of bees that he set upon Snape with a fierce howl.

Severus spoke rapidly, and a hole opened in front of him, it was a portal to a fragrant meadow with clear skies and masses of flowers.

The bees soared into the hole without hesitating.

Throckmorton nearly screamed in frustration. Then he snarled, "Crucio!"

Those watching who knew that curse for what it was cried out in protest and terror, expecting to see their Potions Master writhing in pain from the Unforgivable.

But, amazingly, Severus deflected the curse and spat, "Resorting to an old standby are you, Throckie? No doubt what you are now, is there? Time to finish this, I think. It grows old."

"B-but how?" sputtered the other, shocked that the Unforgivable could be deflected. "That's impossible to deflect!"

"Wrong! You simply have to have something called willpower, imbecile. Langlock!"

Instantly, Throckmorton found himself unable to speak, since his tongue was glued to the roof of his mouth. Powerless to cast, he started to run, but he barely got three feet before Snape's transforming hex hit him.

Throckmorton fell forward as his lower half suddenly sprouted hooves, a tail, and a very large posterior.

Some of the students cheered and clapped, for the professor had given Throckmorton an ass's backside.

"Quit fitting, don't you agree, Victor?" taunted Severus, a diabolical smirk coming over his features. "This is payback for all those students you've humiliated during class, Professor!"

Throckmorton tried to run away, but he couldn't stand up, and could only manage a kind of jumping crawl, much to everyone's amusement.

Severus whispered another incantation, and several blades of grasses turned into a bundle of whippy willow switches and proceeded to beat Throckmorton all around the lawn.

Throckmorton tried to flee, but could barely manage a hopping run, and weird braying sounds issued from his tongue-tied mouth as the switches walloped him.

Students and teachers alike giggled and laughed at the ridiculous yet satisfying sight of the cruel professor getting a taste of his own medicine.

"And that's what happens to naughty boys who torture other people, Mr. Throckmorton!" Severus scolded, waving a reproving forefinger at the scuttling yelping half-assed magician.

More laughter followed his statement.

"Shall I remove the spell, Throckie?" demanded Snape after the other had completed three circuits of the field. "Yes?" He cancelled the tongue-lock spell abruptly.

Throckmorton hopped towards him, bawling and whimpering. "Stop, Snape!"

Severus crossed his arms over his chest and scowled down at the transfigured Death Eater. "Stop? Why? Have you learned your lesson, you wicked boy?"

"Yes! Yes! Take it away!"

"Say please, Throckie. Something I doubt you've ever said in your life."

Throckmorton cast a withering glance at Snape, grinding his teeth. "Never! I'll never say that to a dirty half-blood Squib lover!"

He yelled as the switches redoubled their chastisement.

"All right! I'll say it! I'll say it!"

"Do so."

"Snape . . . please . . . take the spell off."

Severus gestured and the switches became grass again. "Well, you can dish it out, but you can't take it, now can you? Impedimenta!"

Throckmorton immediately fell over, held frozen by Snape's Impediment Jinx. Another wave of his wand and Throckmorton's ass half was replaced with the wizard's original body. "Much as I hate to give you back your original form, you do need to be able to walk for your trial." Severus sighed deeply. "Locomotor mortis!"

Throckmorton rose and hovered behind Snape as he walked back across the field.

The students applauded wildly and then began to chant, "Sack him! Sack him!"

Various things began to fly through the air and land on the floating Throckmorton, thrown by the irate students. Several tomatoes, rotten fruit, eggs, shoes, mud, a pickled eye, moldy fishbones, a cascade of garbage fell all over the confirmed Death Eater until the Headmaster held up his hands and intoned, "Enough!"

The students subsided, grumbling about how Dumbledore ruined their fun. Strangely, not one bit of refuse had landed on Snape during the barrage.

Severus halted in front of Dumbledore and the two Aurors, who were trying not to burst out laughing. "I believe you have some unfinished business with this . . . person, Headmaster?" The way Snape said person made it clear that he was being generous in addressing Throckmorton that way.

The students began to revive their chant of "Sack him! Throw the bugger out on his ear!"

"Quiet!" Severus bellowed, and the students hushed immediately.

"I do indeed, Severus, and thank you," Dumbledore said, pitching his voice to be heard all across the lawn.

"You have a wicked sense of humor, Snape." Williamson commented.

"Thank you, Aubrey. I try."

"Remind me to never make you mad," the young Auror said, then bowed to him.

Severus snorted, but amusement glinted in his black eyes.

Dumbledore cleared his throat pointedly, then said, "I hereby dismiss you, Victor Adolf Throckmorton, from this institution, and hope you never darken its doors again." There were loud whoops from all the students. "Severus, release him from your spells, if you would. There is one other thing I need to address."

Puzzled, Severus obeyed, standing the other wizard upright and cancelling the Impediment Jinx and the floating charm. Throckmorton simply stood there, looking dazed and sullen, clearly all the defiance had been knocked out of him by Severus.

Dumbledore scowled, his long eyebrows coming down over his nose and said in a tone that was quiet yet filled with anger, "I believe we once discussed what I would do if ever you harmed a student of mine or humiliated one, did we not, Victor Throckmorton?"

Throckmorton looked panicked. "I . . . I . . . don't remember," he lied.

"Pity. For I do. I said if ever you crossed the line with a student, I would dismiss you and you would be lucky if you left here on your own two feet. It would appear that you thought I was bluffing, would it not?" Dumbledore inquired calmly, and yet all felt the sudden drop in air pressure and the sudden surge in magical power, it roiled and crackled through the air, and everyone trembled upon sensing it.

Dumbledore drew himself up, and gone was the befuddled Headmaster who was everyone's friend.

In his place was the warrior mage, hard as stone, his eyes flaring blue lightning. He pointed a finger and Throckmorton vanished.

In his place was a small white mouse.

"I never bluff when it comes to my students, Victor." Dumbledore said, still in that deathly calm tone, that nevertheless sent shivers down the spine of those who heard it. "Now begone!" He waved a hand and the mouse raced away down the path.

"Dumbledore, that's our quarry," protested Shacklebolt softly.

"Oh, you can have him, Kingsley. The spell will wear off in an hour and then you can bring him in. Unless a hawk or a cat eats him first." He pointed to where the mouse was running in confused circles.

Williamson shook his head. "Blimey! And I thought Snape was bad."

Dumbledore chuckled. "Where do you think he learned it from, my boy?"

Before anything more could be said, there came a sudden flash of talons and wings, and a large red-tailed hawk swept down and snatched the mouse-Throckmorton up in its talons and flew away with it.

"Oh, well. That's one alternative to Azkaban," Shacklebolt commented. "Serves him right." He turned to his younger colleague. "Let's go, Aubrey, we're done here. Farewell, Headmaster."

The two began to walk towards the front gates of the grounds, Apparating when they stepped outside the gates.

Albus turned about, beginning to herd the students back inside, assisted by the other professors and Narcissa.

"You were awesome, Dad!" Harry said, his eyes shining with pure hero-worship.

"Really?" Severus arched an eyebrow.

"Yes, very awesome!" added Holly. "But now can you heal poor Silver?"

"Of course." Severus moved over to the still form of the great wolf and cast the reverse of the Stunning Hex that had knocked the animal out.

In a few minutes the big wolf yawned, shook himself, and sat up. "Are you all right, Lupin?" Severus whispered, laying a hand upon the broad head.

Silver whuffed in answer and nodded.

He started to rise, only to be mobbed by two very happy children, who hugged and petted him and said that he was wonderful and a hero just like their dad.

"I'm so glad you saved me, Silver," Holly said, hugging him close. "But you missed the best part-Severus thrashing that bully all over the place. And then Professor Dumbledore changed Thick-moron into a mouse and a hawk came and ate him."

Silver gave a disappointed whine and licked her face. Then he stood up and the two children walked one on either side of him back into the school.

Professor Snape paused before following, glancing once more at the empty sky. That hawk . . . coincidence or design? He wondered. There had been something odd about the way it had been there right at that precise moment. Then he sighed and turned away.

Throckmorton's shadow was gone from Hogwarts and that was what mattered. And yet, Severus still felt a frisson of uneasiness crawl down his spine. Lucius was still out there, he reminded himself. He would still have to be alert, for often the worst evil is the one that remains hidden.

So, how did you like that one?

But though Throckie may be gone, danger is still out there.

Next: Strange threatening vanishing notes plague both Harry and Holly.

Without A Trace

With Throckmorton gone, Hogwarts seemed to breathe a sigh of pure relief. Both students and staff were ecstatic that the dour and wicked professor was no longer around to spread his supremacist propaganda. Because of his duel with the arrogant wizard that afternoon, Snape's reputation as a kick-arse teacher had gone up several notches, as the students began to see him as something more than just a strict potions professor.

Of course, Throckmorton's dismissal left a vacancy in the Defense Against the Dark Arts position, and that meant Dumbledore had to find a temporary Defense teacher to fill in Throckmorton's classes. In the meantime, he asked Professor Flitwick to teach some classes, especially the theory and lecture parts, while Severus got to show the students the practical side of Defense, which he had demonstrated so ably in the duel with Throckmorton.

When the students learned the Potions Master was going to be instructing them in practical Defense, they were quite excited. That first lesson, which consisted of third years, Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors, Severus walked in the classroom and was promptly asked by one bold youngster, "Sir, are you going to teach us how to kick a dark wizard's arse the way you did Throckie?"

Severus had raised an eyebrow and tried not to smirk. "Mr. Ashwood, I think first you need to learn how to keep a dark wizard from kicking yours. Then we will see. Remember, the best offense is often a good defense. Wands out and on your feet, you're going to pair up with a member of the opposite House today, and practice Shield Charms . . ."

With his added course load, Severus had very little time left to spend with his children, and he felt guilty for that, though Harry and Holly never complained. They did get to at least eat supper with him and he was there to tell them stories and tuck them in bed, and they saw him for two hours during their tutoring sessions. The rest of the time, though, was usually spent either with Draco and Narcissa or Hagrid or even Filch, who had declared Severus should get the Order of Merlin First Class for ridding the school of a public enemy.

The three children now had tea with the steward every Thursday, after Filch was done with his morning polishing, and the caretaker usually told them some amusing story or two about past students or some local legend, like the story of Herne the Hunter and the Wild Hunt. Holly usually brought Magik to the tea time, so the kitten could play with Mrs. Norris, who surprisingly seemed to enjoy the small cat's company-the two spent an hour chasing enchanted toy mice across the floor (given to Argus by Minerva) or grooming each other or napping in the window of Argus's quarters.

"He's not so bad for an old timer," Draco had said after he had gone to Filch's quarters for tea the first time. "At least he tells interesting stories and doesn't bore you to death."

"Told you he was nice," Holly said. "And don't call him an old timer, Draco, he's fifty-something, I think."

"Your point?" her brother asked. "That's old, Holly. It's like somebody's grandfather."

"No, that's Dumbledore," Holly corrected. "Mr. Filch is more like somebody's uncle."

Draco considered. "All right, I'll give you that."

"If you think Filch is an old timer, what's Dumbledore then?" Harry asked.

"An ancient timer," Draco answered impudently, and they all laughed.

* * * * *

As a result of his increased workload and trying to maintain a look out for possible appearances of Lucius, who had still not replied to the divorce papers Narcissa had sent, Severus's stress levels increased and he became increasingly short tempered and started developing migraines again. That had happened before, when he was much younger, and working as an undercover agent spying on Voldemort, but back then he had not had two children to take care of, and could

just take an Extra Strength Headache Remedy and sleep it off for hours.

But with Harry and Holly to look after, that wasn't an option until both were in bed, and then he could resort to the potion. Which meant enduring the headache until then, and the pain made him have zero tolerance for normal things, like his two children arguing over playing Gobstones. They weren't arguing loudly, but any raised voice sent spikes of pain through his head, and suddenly he could not bear it and snapped, "Both of you, put that away and get to bed! Now!"

The two jumped like startled hares, they hadn't heard that tone from him in a very long time. Holly went white and knocked some of the stones off the table, he scared her so badly.

That made him even sharper. "Damn it! Can't you even follow simple directions?"

"I'm s-sorry!" Holly stammered, kneeling down to retrieve the stones, tears in her eyes.

"Dad, it was an accident," Harry defended, not understanding what had set his father off.

"None of your cheek, boy, unless you want to be grounded for the next two days. Pick those up and get to bed if you can't do anything else but bloody fight."

"Okay, Dad! Merlin!" Harry muttered. What's eating him tonight? He went to help Holly clean up the stones on the floor.

Then they both left to get ready for bed. Just before they separated to go into their rooms, Holly asked softly, "What did we do, Harry? Why is he so mad at us?"

"I dunno. Maybe he just had a bad day in class. It's okay, Holl." He patted her shoulder, seeing she was about to cry. "He didn't mean to growl at you, he's just cranky tonight. Good night."

"Good night, Harry," she said, then went to get into her pajamas. Magik was asleep on her bed and she cuddled the kitten against her chest and whispered, "I really hate it when Severus is mad." She shut her eyes, but tears fell from them anyhow.

Back in the den, Severus massaged his temples, ignoring the accusing look Silver was giving him, then went to get the headache potion from his private potions stores and swallow it. Then he went to lie down in his room, since the potion worked swiftly, and one of the side effects was to send the drinker to sleep. Another one was to give the person rather vivid dreams. But Severus had forgotten that little detail, since he hadn't resorted to that particular potion in so long.

His eyes closed and within minutes he was asleep, and then he began to dream.

* * * * *

He was walking through a dark wood, and something sinister was in the air, making the hair on the back of his neck prickle. Something had been set free tonight, something wild and deadly, and it hunted without remorse. He could hear the wails of some unearthly pack of dogs or wolves in the distance and the air suddenly became chill, like ice, and shrieks and screams now assaulted his ears. Worse, he could swear he heard the voices of his children coming from deeper in the forest, calling him.

He broke into a run, his heart beating frantically in his chest. His children, they were in danger, frightened and crying, he had to find them, to save them from the thing that hunted them.

"Harry! Holly! Where are you?" he yelled, praying they could hear him. "I'm coming! Wait for me!"

But every step he took seemed to get him nowhere. It was as if he moved through a morass of sticky honey, like a fly in amber, he put a foot down and it took ages to reach the ground.

"Dad! Help us!"

"Severus, please! It's coming to eat us!"

"Where are you? We need you, Dad!"

He struggled, but it was no use, he couldn't reach them, he was caught fast and the terrible thing that roamed the woods, the thing that had been unleashed by some fool practitioner of the Dark, was coming for his children. It was hungry . . .he could hear it panting . . .hot breathe scored his cheek and then he could hear it moving . . .

"No! Leave them alone! Harry, Holly, run!" he screamed. His wand was in his hand, but it remained inert, and his magic would not respond.

Helpless, he could do nothing but watch as the wailing pack of bloodthirsty hounds and pale ghostly huntsmen descended upon his children, ready to rend and slay.

He threw back his head and screamed.

"NO-O-O!"

* * * * *

His own scream brought him awake, a scant second later he felt a hand on his shoulder and Harry said, "Dad? Wake up, it's just a dream."

"Severus, are you okay?"

"Huh? What?" he blinked, then his vision cleared and he saw two very concerned children standing beside him, their pajamas rumpled, yawning sleepily.

"You were having a nightmare," Holly said softly, her sapphire eyes bright with worry.

"Yes . . .I was . . .I thought . . .I had lost you . . ." he muttered, trying to clear the cobwebs from his brain.

"Was it the old dream, Dad?" asked his son, who had remembered the way Severus used to have nightmares long ago about the things he had seen as a spy in Voldemort's camp.

Severus shook his head, feeling like an idiot, waking up his children that way. But then the embarrassment changed to guilt, as he recalled how he had snapped at them that evening, followed by relief that they were here, safe and unharmed. Before he knew quite what he was about he had sat up and drew both kids to him in a smothering hug.

They were startled, but only for a moment. Then they jumped up on the bed and snuggled next to him. "Dad, it's okay now," Harry was saying, sounding remarkably like Severus did when he comforted his son after a nightmare. "We're right here, see?"

"It was only a dream," Holly added, patting his back.

Severus didn't speak, he simply held his son and daughter for a long moment. Safe, they're safe, was what he kept thinking, over and over. He had not failed them, they were safe.

Silver nudged open the door and came in as well, laying his big head on Snape's knee.

Oh great, even Lupin thinks I need sympathy, Severus groaned inwardly, but he didn't make any move to shift either the wolf or his kids off of himself. Their presence was slowly driving away the unnatural cold and fear he was still feeling. But at last he decided he'd indulged himself enough and he sighed and said, "I'm all right now."

Harry gazed at him, worry written all over his face. "You sure, Dad? You were screaming awful loud."

"Yes, son. I'm fine. I'm sorry I woke you."

"You want a cup of tea? Mummy always gave me that after I had a bad dream," Holly offered, laying her head on his shoulder.

Severus smiled down at the golden head, embarrassed and amused. "Thank you, Holly. I think that's an excellent idea." He ruffled her hair, then added, "I apologize for my bad temper earlier. I had a nasty headache and I shouldn't have snapped at you."

"That's all right, Severus. I'm just glad you're not mad anymore."

"No, no fear of that, Holly." He reassured her, relieved that she wasn't traumatized by his snarling, like she would have been a few weeks ago. "Let's all have a cup of tea, shall we?"

They agreed and he clapped his hands and summoned Twylla, who provided steaming cups of Sleepytime Tea for everyone and a bowl of beef broth for Silver.

* * * * *

They all slept rather late in the morning as a result of their interrupted sleep schedule. Severus reflected after waking up the second time that morning that it was good he didn't have morning classes that day, he would have been too exhausted to teach.

As a matter of fact, he was feeling a bit under the weather, his throat was sore and his head felt congested. It felt as though he were getting a head cold, he thought irritably, and that wasn't something he could afford right then. He took a long hot shower, hoping the steam would clear out his nasal passages, but no such luck. He began to cough, and then he summoned a Pepper-Up potion from his stores and took that.

He felt marginally better, but not by much. He muttered something about "bloody winter and infections" and how the school was a breeding ground for them, then went to make himself some tea with honey and lemon. Silver was sleeping beside the hearth, but he woke when he heard Snape's soft footstep.

Silver rose and came over to sniff the Potion Master, ignoring Severus scolding him for getting hair all over his robes. He then

looked up at the master wizard and gave a soft half-whine of concern, his amber eyes alight with concern.

"I'm fine. It's only a cold," Severus brushed off the wolf's concern.

Silver gave a soft bark and shook his head. No, it isn't. I can smell it's worse than that.

The Potions Master scowled. "What, now you're a Healer all of a sudden, Lupin? You're a bloody wolf, for Merlin's sake! How do you know what I have?"

Silver sniffed pointedly.

Severus shook his head and continued into the small kitchen area of his apartment, muttering about know-it-all wolves who thought their superior nose made them into brilliant Healers. He muffled a cough with his hand. Then he put the kettle on and sat down at the table waiting for the water to boil. It's just a cold, he told himself firmly. I won't let it be more than that.

He smothered another cough with a napkin. Silver padded into the kitchen and sat down near the stove, giving him a pointed look from his amber eyes.

"Don't give me that look, Lupin. It's a cold, that's all. I'm not sick."

Silver gave a soft half-growl of disbelief, as if to say, Sure it is, keep telling yourself that, Snape. You're in denial, you stubborn ass.

Severus ignored the wolf, going to fix his tea and then settling down to drink it. The tea made him feel a little better, so he had another cup while he waited for the children to wake up.

Harry, mindful that his father had a less than pleasant night, decided to ask a house elf to bring them up breakfast that morning, and soon they were all eating happily, or at least Holly and Harry were. Severus had lost his appetite and barely ate some toast and a few spoonfuls of cream of wheat before pushing his plate away. Despite his potion, he was still feeling awful.

Holly noticed, and asked, "Severus, are you sick? You sound like you've got a cold."

"Yes, I have a slight cold, don't worry about it. I should be better tomorrow." Snape told her, then sneezed into a handkerchief.

"Are you going to teach today?" asked Harry.

"Of course I am. I don't let little things like colds stop me from going to work," answered Severus somewhat sharply.

"Yeah, Dad's tough, he's never sick," Harry boasted.

Severus tried not to smile at his son's definitive tone, though he feared his magnificent constitution was failing him and he was indeed sick.

By the time Susan came over for Holly's therapy session, it was obvious that Snape was getting worse. The little Mind Healer took one look at him and said, "Sev, you ought to be in bed. Sounds like you've got a nasty upper respiratory infection."

"I'm fine, Sue. It's a cold," Severus argued, struggling not to cough.

"A cold? Don't give me that, Snape. This is more than just a cold." She walked over and laid a hand upon his forehead. "Merlin, Severus, you're on fire! Accio Fever Reducer!"

A green bottle flew into her hand from her satchel. "Here. Drink this and no arguments. And then you need to be in bed. You're very sick, you need rest."

Severus scowled, then downed the potion, grimacing. "No, I can't, I have class to teach and detention . . ."

"Severus Snape, you are out on your feet, only you're too damn stubborn to admit it," Susan argued. "You can't teach class in this condition and you know it."

He eyed her up and down with one of his famous glares that struck terror into his students.

Susan simply shrugged. "That might work on your students, Severus, but not me. Come on, let's go and lie down." She took the professor by the arm. "It's for your own good, you know."

"I don't know who the hell you think you are, acting like my mother," muttered Severus.

"Your friend, Sev. Because Merlin knows you need one," she answered quietly.

He huffed, then followed the Healer into his bedroom, knowing even he couldn't outstubborn Sue Keegan. This was the woman who had sat with him through one therapy session after another waiting until he was willing to speak about the nightmares plaguing him, who had held him after he had fallen apart, overwhelmed by agonizing guilt and shame, and who had managed to restore to him a sense of self-worth and given him a friendship he had not had since Lily had died.

Before he could blink, she had transfigured his robes into a very comfortable pair of . . . "Sweats and a T-shirt?" his eyebrows rose nearly into his hair.

"Best thing to wear when you're sick," laughed the Mind Healer. "I practically live in them now," she gestured at her prominent belly. "Well, Mr. Snape? You going to get in bed, or do I need to tuck you in?"

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Try me." She pointed to the bed.

He muttered something under his breath, then gave in, for he really was feeling awful, and crawled back in his comfortable bed. "If I'm asleep, who's going to watch Harry and Holly?" he mumbled.

"Oh, I think between Narcissa and I, we can manage. Here." She handed him a vial of a clear potion.

"Decongestion Draft," he said, making it a statement.

"Yes. Drink it, and then I'll spell your sheets so they stay cool, I know you're burning up."

He gulped the potion, frowning at the taste, then accepted the glass of water she handed him after.

Then she spelled his sheets so they were comfortably cool on his feverish skin and said, "Now get some rest, Sev."

"Have to tell the Headmaster . . .my classes . . ."

"I'll tell him. Sleep."

"All right . . .If you're sure . . ."

"Positive. Close your eyes."

He obeyed, a corner of his mouth quirking up in a reluctant smile. "Y'know, Sue . . . you'll be a good mother one day."

"I hope so." She smiled, tenderly brushed the hair off his forehead, and waited until his breathing had evened into true sleep before departing to inform Dumbledore about Snape's illness.

"I knew he didn't look good this morning," Holly said when she learned that Severus was now in bed.

Harry looked a bit shocked. "He's really sick, Healer Keegan? But . . .Dad never gets sick."

Susan snorted. "Harry, your dad's not immortal. Everyone gets sick now and again, even Mr. I Can Do It All Snape. "

"How sick is he?" asked Harry, his brow creasing with worry.

"Uh, he's caught an upper respiratory infection. That means he'll need bed rest for about three days and potions for a week. After that, he'll be his usual snarky self."

"That long?" Harry looked dismayed.

"It's not really that long, kiddo. Only problem you have is making your stubborn father stay in bed where he belongs." She sighed. "I'm going to have a talk with him when he wakes up again, see if I can't convince him to be a good patient and listen to me like he used to."

Harry rolled his eyes. "That'll take a miracle. Dad always knows everything."

Susan chuckled. "Oh, I know he thinks he does, Harry." She patted her stomach, where her baby was beginning to stir. "Good practice for me, dealing with a stubborn opinionated man. It's kind of like dealing with a two-year-old."

"It is?" Holly gaped at her.

"Oh, yes. They hate the word no, are stubborn, and want their own way all the time," Sue said, her eyes twinkling mischievously. "Now don't ever repeat that, you hear?" She threw a pretend glare at them.

"Uh, Healer Sue, you need more practice," Harry informed her cheekily.

"Brat!" she frowned at him. "Oh, you're Sev's son all right, Harry." Then she ruffled his hair and said it was time to go and get Draco so they could study their Transfiguration after she finished with Holly.

* * * * *

Healer Keegan did manage to convince Severus to stay in bed and rest for the entire three days, much to the amazement of Madam Pomfrey. "Usually the Apocalypse has to occur before that happens. What did you do to him, use a Sticking Charm?"

Susan shook her head. "No. I used a tried and true method that always works."

"Oh?"

"I guilt-tripped him," Susan answered gleefully. "I asked him if he wanted his kids to end up in an orphanage when he died, because that's what was going to happen unless he took my advice and stopped playing Invincible Wizard and started taking care of himself."

"Why . . .that's brilliant!"

The Mind Healer shrugged modestly. "Not really. I just know how Sev thinks, is all. What he won't do for himself, he'll do for his kids."

Madam Pomfrey shook her head in admiration. "Ten years I've worked with the man and I never figured it out. Amazing, simply amazing, young woman!"

Susan shrugged. "If you say so," she said, thinking If you spent some time with him as a friend, maybe you'd have figured that out. His family means the world to him, especially because he never had that good of one to start with. But he does now, and he's not going to let anyone or anything mess it up. "Excuse me, I have to see if he needs anything else before I leave., Poppy. See you next Thursday."

* * * * *

It was while Severus was slowly recovering from his illness that something odd began happening to Holly. Strange pieces of parchment began appearing inside her schoolbooks, or inside her book bag. The parchments were always unsigned, but they usually contained something personal and unflattering about her.

The first one she discovered inside her history book and it read:

Better watch it, Squib girl, before history repeats itself, and you end up like old Filch, mopping up puke and scrubbing toilets.

She was puzzled, not understanding how that note had gotten there in the first place. But when she went to show it to Draco, who was helping her study for a quiz Severus was going to give her as soon as he was better, she discovered the words vanished right off the parchment and there was only a blank piece of paper.

At first, she thought it might be a prank by one of the students, and decided to ignore it.

But another note showed up two days later, this one inside her math notebook, and its message was even crueler.

Do you know what you get when you take five Squibs and multiply them?

A bunch of targets, or a herd of pigs.

Try not to get above yourself, girlie, education's wasted on a worthless thing like you.

This time, Holly grew quite angry about the note's content, but again the words vanished off the parchment. She suspected the prank was probably generated by the three students Severus had caught hexing Magik, it made sense they'd resent her for causing them to get in trouble.

But she couldn't accuse without proof and the ink vanished without a trace soon after she had read a note.

And when she tried to mention the notes to Harry or Draco, she found she couldn't speak of them, every time she tried, she couldn't get the words out. It frightened her, that she could not speak of these odd vanishing notes, not to her brothers, or a teacher, or even Severus. What's happening to me? How come I can't talk about these weird notes?

Severus recovered from his illness in about four days, and was able to go back to teaching. But he noticed that something was odd with his daughter. She seemed withdrawn and not her usual perky self. She still played games with her brothers or walked around the

grounds with Silver, but there was a subdued quality about her that he had not seen since she had first arrived at his home. And yet, when he tried to speak with her, asking if everything was all right, she said she was fine. It puzzled him, but he had a great deal of paperwork to catch up on, and so he could not take as much time as he would have liked to reassure her more closely.

He did, however, ask Harry and Draco if they had noticed anything bothering their sister. Both young wizards said she had become quieter, but she hadn't said anything else. "Keep an eye on her, if you would. Perhaps some students have been teasing her. Just because Throckmorton is gone doesn't mean that prejudice died with him."

"Okay, Dad. We'll make sure nobody says anything mean to Holly." Harry said.

"That's right, Professor Snape. And if anyone does say something, we'll kick their arse," Draco added, a fierce light in his eyes. Then he said quickly, "Uh, don't tell my mother I said that."

"Now, don't go looking for trouble, you two." Severus ordered sternly. "I just wanted to make sure she wasn't being picked on or anything. If anyone does make remarks, I want you to walk away and tell a teacher, or Narcissa. Do not start a fight, boys, am I understood?"

They both nodded reluctantly, and Harry muttered, "Merlin, Dad, you're no fun!"

Severus shot a glare at him. "Never mind, young man. All right, go and amuse yourselves. I should be done with class around four and then we can have lessons on Summoning Charms."

He shooed them away and they went off to play with the unicorns and help Hagrid explore the forest with the gamekeeper and Silver. After they spent the morning with the gamekeeper and the animals, Holly felt more relaxed and had regained some of her equilibrium. It had started snowing a bit, and the boys and Holly had a snowball fight before coming inside the school.

Holly quickly went to change, getting into warmer clothes. She figured she would read a little before going to have her lesson with Severus, since the boys had theirs first that afternoon. But when she went to pick up the book she had been reading, a slip of paper fell out.

She felt her breath start coming in gasps, and knelt to pick it up, trembling slightly as she unfolded it. It was yet another note.

Don't you ever feel guilty causing so many problems for your guardian and brother? If not for you, they wouldn't have to worry about trouble with other students and teachers? Before you came along, they were happy, and now look at what's happened.

The words struck her like a slap, and she began to cry, very softly. There was still a small part of her that felt guilty about costing Draco his father and causing so much trouble for Severus with the press and all. This note, appearing so suddenly after the first ones, picked apart her self-confidence, which had only just started to improve, and all of the old self-doubt returned tenfold.

And then, just as she was going to run and try and show the note to Severus, the writing vanished, same as the others. She crumpled the now blank parchment in her hand. Without proof, she couldn't show anyone anything, they would think her mad. More tears followed. She wrapped her arms about her knees, weeping wretchedly.

"Holly, it's time for your lesson," she heard Harry calling, and swiftly wiped her eyes and tried to compose herself.

"All right. Just a minute!" she called back, and went to wash her face and erase any sign that she was crying, not wanting to have to answer any awkward questions.

When she emerged from the bathroom and went to sit down at the table next to her father, Draco and Harry were going to play some wizard chess in the den. None of them noticed anything different. Severus eyed her in concern. "Holly, is there anything troubling you?" he queried, sensing instinctively that something was wrong.

But she shook her head firmly. "No, Severus. I'm . . .okay. I read all of chapter 23 and 24 of my history like you said. Are we going to have a test on it today?"

"Yes. Are you ready for one, Miss Sinclair?"

"Yes, sir."

Severus handed her the test he had made up earlier and she settled down to her work, outwardly calm, but inwardly her stomach was churning.

* * * * *

Harry also began receiving anonymous notes, that later vanished after he read them.

As a big brother, shouldn't you be trying harder to protect your little sister? Even from Draco? He was once the son of a Death Eater, who knows what kind of curses he learned? And how he could influence your sister?

After reading that he felt an uncharacteristic desire to go and accuse Draco of using Dark magic, and tell him to stay away from Holly. He was disturbed and puzzled, wondering where the note had come from. It did not appear to be a student's handwriting. But he had no time to study it, for it vanished soon after he had read the note.

And when he tried to ask Draco or Severus about it, he found that he couldn't talk about it. Words stuck in his throat, and he couldn't utter a syllable of anything to do with the notes at all. It was both alarming and frustrating, and he didn't understand what was happening to him either.

The notes kept appearing and vanishing all that next week, making Harry moody and sullen and Holly quiet and withdrawn. Twice Harry started a quarrel with Draco, and the second time ended up getting scolded and sent to his room by Severus when he refused to explain why he had called the other boy a stuck-up snot.

The Potions Master didn't know what to make of his children's behavior, and asked Narcissa if she had noticed anything odd between Draco and Harry before this, but the blond witch said just last week they had been fine, playing Quidditch and getting along well with each other. "Perhaps this is just a phase. I think all children go through it."

"Yes, perhaps," Severus nodded.

But that week, even Susan noticed something strange with Holly. "I can't understand it, Severus. She was doing so well, she seemed happy and content, especially after Throckmorton was . . .um . . .eaten. But her emotional levels are depressed and upset, almost the way she was when I first began with her, and yet when I ask if there's anything wrong, she says she is fine. I've tried and tried to get her to talk to me, but she refuses. I just don't understand it."

"That makes two of us." Severus sighed. "And Harry has had an attitude with me as well lately." He heaved a sigh. "I will try to talk to her again tonight, Sue. You seem a little tired yourself."

"I am, a bit. This baby takes a lot out of me, Sev. I'll be glad when he or she is born."

"Perhaps you had better go home and rest?" he suggested. "I wouldn't want Billy to think I'm working you to exhaustion."

"Ha! He knows better, Sev. I'm my own worst enemy there, old friend." The Mind Healer laughed. Then she yawned, covering it with a hand. "Although perhaps you're right, and I do need some more rest. Keep in touch and if you or Holly need to talk, Floo me."

Severus bid her goodbye and then returned to his desk in the corner of the den to mark some test papers for his fifth year potions. Today Harry acted as if he had never had any quarrel with Draco, and Narcissa had taken all three children to Hogsmeade to Honeydukes and Zonkos. Even Holly had perked up at that. Perhaps she would be willing to talk to him afterwards, he mused, then settled down and began grading with a vengeance.

Chapter End Notes:

So, how did you like the way Sue handled sick Sev?

And who is behind the mysterious notes?

Thanks for all the reviews!

Fire Seeing

Severus had just finished grading an entire stack of homework and all of his fifth years' exams when the children and Narcissa returned from Hogsmeade. Draco and Harry were in high spirits and even Holly was smiling brightly. It was with relief that Severus set down his quill and stretched, joining Narcissa and the children at the table for a spot of tea and some cakes that the witch had purchased from a bakery in Hogsmeade that Severus particularly liked.

"Rough afternoon, Severus?" asked Narcissa, indicating the stack of graded papers with a slight motion of her chin. "More students not paying attention and failing?"

Severus rubbed his temple and his mouth twitched into a reluctant smile. "Some, yes. More than I would like, but I do have high standards, and those who fool around and don't pay attention in class reap the rewards of their folly on my exams. But on the whole, most of them passed, a few did better than expected, and very few received top marks." He carefully sipped his tea, it was very hot, but it warmed him considerably. He made a mental note to increase the temperature in his quarters, he sometimes forgot how drafty and damp it was down here in the bowels of the castle after living here for so many years.

"Did I do all right on my test, Severus?" Holly asked worriedly, shredding her cake into tiny pieces on her plate.

He bit back a groan, he had meant to grade her exam along with the others, but had instead shoved it off to the side and forgotten about it until now. "I haven't marked it yet, Holly. I'll review it after tea. Did you have a good time at Hogsmeade?"

"Yes. Narcissa-I mean Mrs. Malfoy-" Holly corrected herself, blushing. "-took us to Zonkos and to Honeydukes and we saw the Shrieking Shack too, only she wouldn't let us go right up to it and I didn't want to, either. It . . .it gave me a bad feeling," Holly said, suppressing a shiver.

Severus gave her a sympathetic look, he understood exactly where she was coming from. The Shrieking Shack held terrible memories for him since Black's cruel joke and he had not been back since then. "I can't say I'm surprised. Unpleasant things once happened there." Like a near murder.

"I know. I could feel it."

"Mother says it's the most haunted building in Britain," Draco related, feeling a deliciously shivery feeling run down his spine.

"Yeah, and it looked it too," Harry added. He didn't mention that the Shack had given him the creeps. "We got some sweet products at Zonkos, Dad. Purple Tongue Twister Candy and Bangarangs-that's wizard crackers that make an extra loud bang when you throw them down and they burst open with colored streamers, and Buzzing Taffy-it makes you buzz like a bee for two minutes and . . .uh, what else, Draco?"

"Giggle Juice, makes you laugh insanely at everything for three minutes," Draco supplied. "I wanted to get the Death By Fart Cake only Mother wouldn't let me," he pouted a little.

"Wise decision," Severus said, and gave Narcissa a glance of approval.

"I said to myself, that is the very last thing he needs. I remember how the dungbombs the Gryffindors used to light off stank for days when we were students, until old Slughorn would cast a Fresh Air charm to get rid of the stench." Narcissa made a face.

Severus grimaced, for he too could recall that being the case. And most of those had been thrown by Potter and his band of pranksters.

"But Mother, the cake isn't like a dung bomb." Draco protested. "It just makes you fart till you nearly pass out for five minutes." He snickered and so did Harry.

Holly rolled her eyes. "Boys! They're disgusting," she muttered to Narcissa.

"Girls!" Draco shot back. "They're boring!"

"What else did you buy?" Severus interjected, before an argument could get started.

The children then listed multiple types of candy they had purchased with their allowance, and Severus's head swam, making him regret he had asked. Then he added firmly, "You are not to eat all of that at once, understand? Otherwise you'll end up with a terrible stomachache and be so hyper you won't be able to sit still for two days."

Harry and Holly groaned at that dictate.

"Merlin, you're strict, Professor," said Draco, giving the other two a commiserating look.

"Don't think you're allowed to consume all of your sweets in an hour or two either, Draco Anthony," said his mother.

"Aww, but Mother . . .!"

"Never you mind, young man." Narcissa waved a finger at her son. "Severus, I think we had better be going. I need to speak with Mr. Avante again about the custody suit and see if he has heard from Lucius yet." She rose and beckoned to Draco, who climbed to his feet reluctantly.

"I understand. I hope Lucius sees sense." Severus replied. "I have also written to him, asking that he give up his paternity rights to Holly so that I may adopt her."

"Has he answered you?"

"No. But it has only been two days, so perhaps he has not read it yet." Severus told her, though he thought it more likely that Lucius was simply ignoring him or had decided to delay a response on purpose, making his old schoolmate sweat in repayment for the humiliation he

had been dealt at Snape's hands. He looked pointedly at his two children. "What do you say to Narcissa?"

"Thank you, Mrs. Malfoy," the two chorused.

Narcissa smiled at them. "You are very welcome, children. We had a very nice outing. We shall have to take your father next time, if he's not chained to his desk marking papers, that is."

Then the Malfoys returned to their own suite and left Severus time to mark Holly's test and discuss the results with her. Actually, there wasn't much to discuss, because the girl had aced her exam, and Severus was pleased with her progress and said so.

The child gave him one of her sweet smiles, basking in his approval, and he began to hope that she had put whatever was bothering her behind her. "Is there anything else you would like to discuss, Holly?"

She bit her lip. "N-no." I really wish I could tell him about the notes. But I can't. If I try, I'll just . . . She quickly shook her head.

"Are you certain, little one? I have noticed . . .you haven't been yourself lately. If there is something troubling you, you can tell me."

Holly looked down at the ground. She wanted to blurt out her secret, it was tearing her apart inside, but whatever strange compulsion it was held her mute, a prisoner in her own mind. "I . . .can't."

"Why not? Don't you trust me?" Severus queried, a hurt tone now entering his voice. He knew that guilt was a great motivator, especially with conscientious little girls like Holly.

"Yes, but . . .I can't tell you! I . . .can't!" she wailed, struggling against the terrible compulsion with everything she had. It was no use. She burst into tears.

Well, he had been expecting a reaction, true, but not one like this. He scolded himself roundly in his head for pushing her too hard, he should have left well enough alone. Once again you've mucked things up, Severus. Oh, Merlin, I don't think I'm cut out to be a father

to a girl. I don't ever recall making Harry cry this easily. Except the rare time I spanked him. Ah, but then Harry was never rejected by his father the way Holly was. And now I've gone and made things worse. "All right, little one. You don't have to tell me if you don't want to. Now hush." He drew her onto his knee and she buried her face in his shoulder, sobbing pathetically.

He held her for what seemed like hours, but was actually only ten minutes. Severus carded his hand through her hair and hushed her, alternating between that and patting her back soothingly. Holly eventually composed herself and sat up, taking the handkerchief he handed her and wiping her eyes and nose. "I'm sorry."

"For what? Holly, if there is a problem, and you don't wish to talk to me, please talk to Healer Sue, or your brothers, or at least write it in your journal. And don't demean my intelligence by telling me there's nothing wrong, young lady, because I know there is." He tilted her chin up and stared into her eyes for a brief moment. Then he hugged her and said, "I think Harry's out of the shower now, so you can use it."

She wrinkled her nose at him. "Are you saying I smell?"

"What? No, but all that crying often gives you a headache, and I find a nice warm shower helps clear your head."

She gave him a tremulous smile. "Oh. All right." Then she cocked her head and asked, in that odd direct knowing way she sometimes had, "Do you know that because you've cried like that too once?"

Severus hesitated. He normally did not discuss his past with anyone, especially not his children, unless absolutely necessary. But, to his everlasting astonishment, he found himself nodding. "Once, and more than once, Holly, I have cried just the way you did now. So I am speaking from experience. Would you like to follow my advice?"

"Yes." Suddenly she flung her arms about him again. "I'm sorry you were sad like me, Severus. I hope you had someone there to hug you the way you did with me."

And for the second time in five minutes, the Potions Master was astonished and rendered speechless. How the blazes did she know that I never had anyone to offer me comfort? And that it would have meant everything if I had, though I would have rather been Crucio-ed than admit it back then? Oh, Lucius, you fool, you made the greatest mistake of your life when you cast her out.

"Thank you," he managed to say at last. "Will you think about what I said?"

"Yes." Then she turned and headed towards the bathroom. "You give as good a hug as my mum," she called over her shoulder.

That time Severus smiled. Oh, Holly, you are a gem!

Harry nearly banged into his sister coming out of the bathroom. "Holl, what the . . . hey, have you been, uh . . .crying?"

"A little," she admitted, knowing it was impossible to hide it now.

"Why? Did Dad yell at you for failing his test or something?"

"No. I aced the test, and even if I didn't I never cry over something like that!" Holly replied indignantly. "What do you think I am-a nerd?"

Harry giggled. "Well, you said it, not me."

"Puh-lease!" She rolled her eyes at him.

"Then what's the matter?" he persisted, for it really bothered him when she was upset. It made him ache queerly in his chest, though he didn't understand quite why.

"I . . .can't say. But . . .it's not important. Now, could you please move, Harry? I'd like to get a shower before bed, I'm kind of all hot and sweaty."

Harry smirked. "Nothing wrong with a little sweat."

"Sure, if you're a caveman. Ugh!" She made a face at him. "Move it, Mr. Snape."

"Okay, okay, keep your pants on," he laughed, then ducked her playful cuff on the ear, surrendering the bathroom to her.

It was with relief that Holly shut the door, and began running the water. She prayed that Severus's suggestion of writing in her journal would mean she could write about the notes.

But though the shower did help her relax, she returned to her room and tried to write about the odd notes and was unable to form a single letter. Every time she tried, her pen would freeze, or the ink would splatter, or the nub of the quill tore a hole in the parchment. After fifteen minutes of struggling she gave up and nearly threw the pen across the room.

At a loss, she hugged her sleepy kitten and shed a few more tears of despair before climbing into bed and trying to sleep.

When Severus came in some ten minutes later, he found her sleeping soundly, Magik curled upon her chest, purring loudly. He carefully cast a Warmth Charm over the bed before tucking the blanket more securely about her. "Pleasant dreams, my little one." He bent and kissed her on the forehead and then departed.

Harry was still awake, reading up on Quidditch moves, though he set the book down when Severus came in. "Is it time for bed already?"

"Yes, son. But first I would like to ask you to do me a favor." Severus began, sitting down on the edge of Harry's bed.

"What, Dad?"

"See if you can find out what's been bothering your sister. I tried and she refused to tell me and grew upset. Perhaps she might feel more comfortable talking to you, who is close to her own age."

"All right. I can do that," Harry agreed.

"Good. Now, put the book down and get under the covers, it's chilly tonight," Severus ordered, turning down the sheet and blanket.

Harry rolled his eyes. "I'm not five, Dad." He huffed, pretending to be insulted, but then he crawled into bed and allowed Severus to tuck him in. He hid a smile when Severus cast a Warming charm over the bed, making sure he was nice and toasty. "Night, Dad."

"Good night, Harry." Severus ruffled his son's hair before he Noxed the lamp.

* * * * *

Mindful of his promise, Harry woke the next morning determined to speak with his sister about whatever was wrong with her. He knocked his book off his night table when he went to grab his glasses, and as he knelt to pick it up, he discovered another strange parchment note.

Some big brother you are! Dark influences are gathering around your little sister and you don't even know it. Are you a complete idiot? Your incompetence is going to get her and everyone you love killed, and then you'll have no one to blame except yourself.

After reading the scathing letter, the ink vanished and so did the parchment, but it left a sickening sense of failure and disappointment in its wake. Harry shook his head, not knowing why the notes caused him to feel so . . . useless, but knowing deep down that if he didn't keep an eye on Holly, something bad was going to happen.

And he refused to be the failure the notes accused him of being. He was a Snape, after all. He dressed quickly in a pair of jeans, a long-sleeved rugby shirt and a pullover, since it was cold down here, and most likely outside as well, since March in the Highlands near Inverness was still winter. Severus had gone to class already, so Harry summoned Twylla and asked her to send up breakfast for two. Then he went to go wake up his sister.

He found her asleep on her side, her face peaceful in repose, except for the lone tear that had fallen down her cheek. He leaned over to shake her awake and froze upon seeing that blatant sign of distress. Huh? She's crying in her sleep? Not good. Not good at all. Dad was

right, there really is something major up with her. But why won't she tell him? Or Sue? It's not like they're gonna laugh at her.

He felt a sudden overwhelming surge of protectiveness. Perhaps she would confide in her older brother instead. At least he hoped so. He called, "Hey, Holly. Time to wake up."

She whimpered, stirred, and then she opened her eyes. "Huh? Harry?"

"That's my name. C'mon, Holl, rise and shine. I've got breakfast waiting."

She sniffed. "Uh . . .I'm not very hungry this morning."

"Just eat a little, okay? You know Dad's rule."

She made a face at him, and recited, in a dead-on imitation of Severus, "Breakfast is one of the most important meals of the day, it helps your body wake up and gives you the necessary energy for higher brain function."

Harry cracked up. "Good one, Holly!"

"I try."

"Okay, now try getting out of bed and coming into the kitchen."

"All right, Mr. Bossy." She reluctantly threw off her covers and sat up. "You mind giving me some privacy?"

"Sure," he felt himself go red, then hastily exited the room. As he shut the door, he could hear her giggling mischievously. Little brat, she just loves to embarrass me!

Holly joined him some five minutes later, wearing jeans and a blue sweatshirt with pink lettering that said Chicks Rule! On the coffee table were French toast, bacon, ham, eggs, and crumpets with strawberry jam. Plus a pot of steaming hot cocoa. Holly took a

crumpet with jam and butter and nibbled it, while Harry fixed a plate with everything on it and devoured it.

Halfway through his mug of cocoa, Harry paused and asked casually, "You have a nightmare or something last night?"

Holly jerked her head up, for she had been dreaming about the notes last night. "No . . .not really. Why?"

"Cause when I went to wake you up, it looked like you were . . .err . . .crying in your sleep."

"It did?"

"Yeah. Are you okay, Holl?"

"Yes. I'm fine."

Harry gave her a sharp look. "Well, you're not acting fine. You're all quiet and . . .you hardly ever smile any more. Is there anything going on with, uh, older kids here?"

"Going on? What's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean, is anyone saying things to you or picking on you? You can tell me if they are and I'll take care of it. Or Dad will."

She bit her lip and began eating again, not saying anything. But he could tell by the set of her shoulders that she was upset.

"Holl, you can tell me. I'm your brother," he encouraged.

"It's not like that, Harry."

"Then what is it?"

"I . . .can' t tell you."

"Can't or won't?"

"Can't."

He sighed. Well, he had tried. It wasn't his fault she was being so stubborn. Or whatever. But she looked miserable, he thought with a flash of pity. He tried to think of something to cheer her up. "You want to spend some time with the unicorns? Just us for a little?"

Holly considered. She felt depressed and not being able to speak about what was depressing her made her feel sick. There had been another note awaiting her when she went to get dressed this morning, and this one hinted that she was nothing but a troublesome burden upon Severus and Harry and it might have been better if she had chosen to die in the snow that winter's night.

That had upset her so much she had almost started crying right then, but had managed to clamp down on her emotions just in time, not wanting Harry to think she was a crybaby. Or crazy.

"All right. I'd like to brush the foals again."

"Good, let's go after we're done eating."

* * * * *

Running the soft body brush over Rose's coat, which sparkled as the winter sun hit it at a certain angle, relaxed Holly just as good as a session with Healer Keegan. The little foal was sweet and liked to nibble playfully at her hair, the silly antics made Holly smile. She smelled like spring flowers and the scent made Holly's stomach start to unclench.

Holly continued to brush the sleek coat, humming softly and scratching the filly behind the ears. Rose nudged her, and Holly hugged the little head close and whispered, "Silly filly, I don't know why you like me so much. I'm just a Squib reject."

Rose exhaled softly and nuzzled her again. Holly smiled and finished brushing her. Across the corral, Harry was grooming Duchess, patiently untangling the silken mane. Holly stared at him for a minute, wishing for an instant that she was like her older brother, whom

nothing ever seemed to bother, who had the magic fate had denied her.

Suddenly, she felt a nudge on her shoulder, and she turned to find Dancer regarding her with one blue eye. "All right, your turn, my lady," she said, and picked up a currycomb and started to brush the mare.

A peaceful aura radiated from Dancer, and it wrapped the troubled girl in a soothing spiritual embrace. Holly leaned into the unicorn's shoulder, breathing in Dancer's sweet refreshing scent, like mint and lavender, and wept into the ivory mane. Dancer whickered and nuzzled, not liking the aura of sadness and depression the girl was giving off.

The mare projected strong feelings of hope and love at the girl, and some of the awful aura faded. Holly quickly wiped her eyes on her sleeve then resumed her grooming. "Thanks," she whispered.

Harry too, was receiving similar treatment from Duchess, who also sensed an odd darkling stench clinging to the boy. She blew softly and gently tapped her horn against Harry, removing a portion of the dark aura, though she did not have the time to do a full cleansing upon the young wizard.

As soon as Duchess's horn tapped his cheek, he felt at peace, the feelings of insecurity and doubt banished. He stroked the unicorn's coat, smiling at the way it felt beneath his hand, warm and sleek and brilliantly alive. He leaned his cheek against the velvet hide for a moment, feeling better than he had in over a week.

When they at last took their leave of the unicorns, after putting all the grooming items back in the box on Hagrid's porch, both of them felt a whole lot better. They found Draco rubbing his eyes and yawning at the door to their quarters.

"Hey, where were you two? Thought you'd still be in bed since your dad's not home to make you wake up."

"I would, but my big brother here insisted I get up early," Holly complained, sticking her tongue out at Harry.

"So hex me," Harry grinned. "We were grooming the unicorns. They like to get groomed early."

"Oh. All right." Draco didn't mind grooming the unicorns, but he wasn't about to get up early to do it. "Let's do something different today, shall we?"

"Like what?" Harry asked.

"Uh, can we go inside? I don't like talking about things in the middle of the corridor where anyone can hear," Draco said.

"Oh. All right." Harry waved a hand and muttered the password to unlock the door.

There was a click and then he pushed open the door and they entered the Potion Master's suite.

After taking a seat on the couch and fetching some cold pumpkin juice from the pantry for himself and the other two kids, Harry looked at Draco expectantly. "So . . .what's your great idea?"

"Well . . .I've been thinking. . . Holly, you have the Sight . . .so what if we had a little Divination session? You could, I don't know, try and see our future or something." He looked at Holly. "Well, how about it?"

"Draco . . .I don't really know how to control my Sight," she began, uncertainly. Then the taunting words of the note began whispering through her head. Useless . . .worthless . . .Squib . . . "I haven't really tried to use my gift since . . .that night, before Harry and Severus found me. But . . .maybe I could try."

Draco grinned and clapped her on the back encouragingly. "Okay. What do you have to do?"

"Look into fire," she answered.

"That's it?"

"Yes. That's how my Sight works. I look into fire and sometimes I see visions."

"All right. Let's do it then," Draco waved his practice wand and intoned firmly, "Incendio!" while pointing the wand at the fireplace.

The fire blazed up in the hearth.

The boys watched as Holly knelt in front of the hearth, eyes closed, trying to connect with the inner core of her power, trying to call upon her mercurial gift. A minute passed. Then two. She felt something stir deep inside her, and then she opened her eyes and gazed into the heart of the fire.

At first all she saw was the blue tendrils that flickered in the center of the flames. The fire danced and spun, the heat calling to her. She opened her eyes wide and suddenly felt a familiar pain in her head. She gasped.

"What is it? Do you See my future?" Draco asked.

She stiffened, feeling her eyes water and then she focused upon the fire, burning merrily . . .

Harry, Draco, and she ran through the dark oaks of the Forbidden Forest, terror nipping at their heels as something wild and evil followed them, pursuing them through the trees despite their attempts to run.

She ran desperately, terror seizing her limbs, her breath coming in harsh pants.

"Hurry, Holly!" cried Harry, grabbing her arm and dragging her along when she stumbled.

Behind she could feel something gathering, a dark pulsing aura, and then came the drumming of ghostly hooves and the forlorn cries of a pack of hounds.

"Run, Holly!" shouted Draco, his face ghost-pale beneath his white-blond thatch. "They're getting closer!" He pushed her hard in the back.

"Harry . . .the hounds, they're coming! Do you hear them?"

Harry nodded, casting a glance over his shoulder.

Some twenty feet beyond came the advance of the hunt, large white dogs with glowing reddish eyes and red ears the color of blood. An eerie evil bay emerged from their throat, filled with hunger and the desire to rend and tear.

The three ran on, but it soon became plain that the dogs would have them, for they were tiring, and the hunt was fast overtaking them. Her breath rasped in her throat, her chest burned like fire, she ran harder than she had ever run in her life, Harry beside her and Draco a few steps behind.

The huntsmen, astride spectral steeds with glowing eyes and skeletal legs, burst into view, and each of them bore a rider whose face was a mask of grim death come to life. And leading the pack, on a great gray steed, was a huge man with a stag's antlers . . .He had a long bow in his hands and he drew back the string and loosed an arrow . . .it flew true, as did the others, and she and her brothers fell, victims to the fury of the spectral hunt . . .

"Holly? Holly!" shouted Harry, going and shaking her shoulder. The girl had gasped, screamed, then jerked hard before settling back into her kneeling pose. "Are you okay?"

"Did you See anything?" Draco asked.

Holly did not answer. Instead she fastened her gaze back upon the fire. No! I can't let that be the only future I See! It can't end that way! It can't!

Once again, pain tore through her head like a lash, and the fire was replaced by another vision . . .

This time, she alone was the hunt's quarry, and she could feel the hounds' hot breath on the back of her neck as she raced through the trees. She knew even then that it was too late, she could not outrun the hunt, that soon she would tire and then they would have her, but at least it was better than the alternative.

Her brothers were not with her, though she knew they were nearby. They called for her, but she kept running. It was better to be the sacrifice. Perhaps this was what had been intended, all those months ago, this was why she had been spared a freezing death . . .

Abruptly, she turned and faced her pursuers, glaring up at the great horned leader and the snarling savage dogs defiantly. "Come on then! Come and get me!" she cried, her voice a faint whisper of defiance.

The horned huntsmen drew rein in front of her, studying her with cold emerald eyes, and then he threw back his head and laughed mockingly . . .

Holly groaned, coming out of the trance, and she shivered. Once again she had Seen two possible futures. Once again she had been given a choice.

"Holly? What did you See?" Draco asked again, peering at her worriedly.

"I . . . I don't want to talk about it," she muttered, feeling exhaustion sweep through her.

"Why? It can't be that bad," Draco persuaded. "Unless . . . you didn't see my father coming back for me, did you?" There was a note of panic in his voice.

"No. I Saw . . ." I saw us being hunted and killed by some ghostly hunt, she thought, suppressing a shiver. "It doesn't matter, because it's not going to happen."

"How do you know?"

"I just do," she sighed wearily.

"Then why can't you tell us what you Saw?" Draco demanded exasperatedly.

"Because I don't want to bloody talk about it!" she yelled, jumping to her feet. "Just leave me alone, okay?" She spun and headed towards her bedroom.

"Holl, where are you going?" Harry asked.

"To bed. I'm tired." She slammed the door to her room shut and locked it.

Behind her she could hear Harry and Draco quarreling.

"Nice going, Malfoy!" said Harry angrily. "You couldn't leave well enough alone."

"Me? Don't blame me for this, Snape! I just wanted to do something fun, all right? How did I know what she'd See? Matter of fact, I still don't know what it was."

"Who cares? You've made her upset, you dumb git!"

"Who are you calling a git, Snape?" growled Draco.

"You. Now maybe you'd better leave."

"Why should I?"

"Because otherwise I'm going to knock your teeth in," Harry answered.

"Ha! As if!" laughed the other.

"Just go home, Malfoy! You and your bloody stupid ideas."

"Fine! Who needs you?"

The door to the suite slammed.

Next thing she heard was Harry knocking on her door.

"Holly? You okay? Do you want to talk about it?"

"No. Now go away, Harry. Please."

She waited until she heard his footsteps retreat, then she turned and hugged Magik to her, startling the kitten awake. "Shhh. Just let me hold you." She hugged the small animal to her, burying her face in the kitten's black and white fur and rocking back and forth. She could feel tears behind her eyelids, but she did not let them fall. This was too deep for tears.

March 15th. The Ides of March.

That date popped into her head then. She knew what it meant. On that day she would fulfill the vision.

She lay back down, cradling the kitten close to her, the vision flickering before her eyes. She knew she could tell no one. Some secrets were meant to be kept. And she knew this one would not have to be kept long.

Well, what do you think about this one?

The Summoning

A/N: Just a friendly warning--They're ba-a-a-ck!

Harry and Draco both tried to get Holly to speak of what she had Seen in the fire, but she refused to talk about it. She knew if they learned what vision she had, they would try to change it, they would insist she not sacrifice herself, or worse, they would tell Severus. Holly knew enough about her Sight to know that the visions sometimes came true in the way you least wanted if you attempted to alter events leading up to them. But making a conscious choice to accept one possible future over the other was often enough to enable it to come to pass. As she had done that lonely winter's night.

The notes still appeared and vanished with distressing regularity, but she was no longer so wounded by them. Having made up her mind, her course was set, and even the vicious taunts in the notes no longer truly affected her. She had gone beyond them, to a place deep within where the words could not touch her.

Her new calmness and serenity fooled her father and Susan into thinking that whatever problem she had was resolved, and the adults quit eyeing her with trepidation and concern.

Harry, on the other hand, became increasingly irritable as the week wore on, for the notes continually nagged him to watch out for Holly, and sneered and belittled his efforts to do so almost every day, it seemed. Then too, not knowing the content of the vision Holly had experienced was also driving him crazy. He knew there was something in it that was not good, he had seen the way she reacted towards it. And her refusal to speak about it only confirmed it.

Severus was aware of his son's moodiness, but he was busy trying to teach two classes at once and get ready for finals before Easter break, and so he put it down to typical pre-adolescent angst, especially since he now had a rival of sorts in Draco. So he didn't pay attention the way he should have to what was causing his son's change in personality, a fact which he was going to regret deeply later on.

March 15th fell on a Thursday that year, and Holly awoke knowing in her bones that today was the day her vision would be fulfilled. But she did her best to try and act normally, greeting Severus and Harry before breakfast, eating with them, and then hugging Severus goodbye before he left to go to class. She did, however, hug him an extra long time, causing him to remark, "What's this? You're acting like you're not going to see me again, child. I'll be home the same time as always. Now be good, all right?"

"Yes, Severus," she said, her heart aching, for she knew this would be the last hug she ever gave him.

"That goes for you too, Harry," he called to his son who was still eating.

"All right, Dad. Have a good day in class."

Severus bit back a sharp laugh, for today was his most dreaded class, double potions with Gryffindor and Slytherin. "I will see you this afternoon. Mr. Filch mentioned he could use your help cleaning out an old cabinet in one of the storage rooms, so when you are finished here, perhaps you two and Draco could assist him? He says he will have lunch for you afterwards."

"Sure, no problem, Dad. We'll be glad to help." Harry said eagerly. There were often interesting finds in the old cabinets in the castle. "Right, Holl?"

"Of course," she answered. That would give her time to say goodbye to the steward and Mrs. Norris. She wondered sadly who would take care of Magik when she was gone. Perhaps Harry would keep her, for remembrance.

After fetching Draco, they spent two hours cleaning the rather old and dusty storage room with Filch. There was a rather large cabinet in the back of it that had tons of boxes with all kinds of old papers and scribbled cards from old detentions and other odds and ends.

"Tis time we had a go at sorting through this mess," Filch said, and that's what he gave to the children to do, while he dusted and scrubbed the floor.

Draco, Harry, and Holly each took a box and sorted the contents into piles-Junk, Important, and Not Sure. Whatever was illegible or so old it no longer mattered went into the Junk pile. Those papers that were current or had some bearing on school policy or were teaching notes went into the Important pile, and those which they couldn't decide on went into Not Sure.

They were at that for another hour before Filch called a halt and said it was time for lunch.

He had the house elves bring them quite a spread in his quarters, and they all ate hungrily. Even the cats ate cans of salmon, while their respective Squibs dined on deviled eggs, ham salad, cold chicken, various side salads, and several kinds of sweets plus tea, butterbeer, lemonade, and sweetened iced tea.

During lunch, Harry seemed pensive, not eating as much as he usually did after a morning of chores. He seemed to be mulling something over in his mind, until Filch cast him a curious glance and asked, "Something on your mind, lad?"

Harry took a gulp of his lemonade before answering. "Well, uh, I was sorting through those old cards in one box, the ones that list old detentions for students, and I found some with . . .uh . . .James Potter's name, and Sirius Black, and even Remus Lupin."

"Aye, they were known troublemakers back in the day, lad," Filch nodded. "Seemed like they were in detention every other week."

"Yeah, but I saw that . . .a lot of their detentions were for . . .for being smart to teachers, and playing pranks on you and . . .and my dad," Harry pointed out.

"Aye, lad. They didna cotton too much t'me, being as I was a Squib and death on smartmouthed brats, which Potter and Black were, no two ways about it. Not Lupin, so much, he seemed to get in trouble

more by association. Pettigrew was the other one, a sly little rat, always creeping round the edges of things and spying. Potter and Black were the masterminds though. And they loved pranking Slytherins, 'specially your dad, Harry. Ah, that is, yer adopted dad."

"No, Severus is my dad. I don't even remember my birth one, and after looking at all those cards, I'm glad!" Harry said angrily. "They . . .they picked on my dad something awful, Mr. Filch! Like . . .like the way those bullies in Diagon Alley did to Holly or Cross did to you. Or the way some kids used to do to me at my other school, before Dad put a stop to it."

"You had problems with bullies, Harry?" Holly asked in astonishment.

"When I was little, yeah. I was seven and there was this group of five or six older boys that used to tease me every chance they got-trip me, push me, call me names, once they even banged my head into the cement and ripped off my glasses and buried them. They called me Freaky Four-eyes and Snape the Scaredycat. That one time, with my glasses, the Headmaster got involved and he called up Dad, and Dad came and he was like ready to kick some kid's arse. He called the bullies' parents, they had a big meeting, the kids got suspended for a couple days and after that they never touched me."

"Probably afraid Professor Snape would kick their arse," Draco said, smirking. "'Cause nobody messes with your dad now, Harry."

Harry still looked troubled. "No, but when he went to school . . ." He bit his lip, discovering that piece of information really upset him. Now he understood better why Severus never discussed James with him, and he felt somehow ashamed to be the other's son, the son of a bully who had hurt the man who raised him. "I don't understand, Mr. Filch . . .why would they do such things to my dad? What for?"

Filch sighed, steeping his fingers on the table. "Lad, that's a hard question to answer. Sometimes kids pick on other kids 'cause they're different or something, or just because they can. I wish I knew, it would explain a lot of what's happened to me . . ."

Holly listened for a few more minutes, thinking sadly, people fear the different, and what they fear, they hurt. She knew the time of the vision was growing closer and she was determined to be prepared. She waited until Harry, draco, and Filch were all engaged in the discussion before slipping off her chair and pretending to go and use the bathroom down the hall.

In actuality, she headed outside the castle, heading first to bid goodbye to the unicorns and then, after she had hugged them all farewell, went towards the forest to find Silver. She had just reached the edge of the wood, hoping that Silver would return from his hunting trip soon enough for her to tell him goodbye. The sky, which had started out overcast and a dreary gray color, darkened to an odd mist filled purple black.

She could feel something heavy in the air, rather like an impending storm, though she knew it was much more than that. The event she had seen in fire was coming closer, she could feel it creeping upon her like a cat stalking. Soon it would be upon her and then she would have no choice left but to run. She wrapped her arms about herself and tried to stop trembling. She was frightened, she did not want to do this thing. But neither did she want her brothers to die along with her. If it had to be someone, let it be her. She was expendable.

She felt the air stir about her and then she heard Silver howl, long and low, warning of some danger. Good old Silver! I wish . . .I wish I had time to grow up with you, to live a normal life. But I do have time to say goodbye.

She walked into the Forbidden Forest, breaking Severus's rule deliberately, she thought with a flash of shame. I'm sorry. I hope you can forgive me.

* * * * *

By the time Filch had finished discussing the whys and wherefores of bullies, the Marauders in particular, Harry had nearly conquered the odd feeling of shame and empathy in his gut. Shame for what James had done and empathy for Severus, for he knew exactly what it felt like being a target. And Filch had said most of the pranks and bullying

had gone unpunished by the teachers and even Albus had turned a blind eye, trying to laugh it off. But it wasn't funny! It wasn't, even if most of what they cast didn't really do damage, it still made Dad feel bad and people laughed . . . He could still recall the way other kids had laughed at him when he was knocked sprawling or was pushed into a desk. And it was the laughter that had hurt most of all.

Draco had remained a silent observer through much of the conversation, for he had never had to attend a school with other students, being privately tutored, and so had never faced any bullies. But the Marauders and the kids who had beaten Harry up didn't sound all too different, except one group had used magic and the others didn't. He thought with a flash of insight that Lucius had probably been a bully in his school days. He certainly had the attitude for it. Thinking of his father made him automatically think of his sister, and he looked over to see how she was taking this topic. It was then he noticed that Holly still had not returned from her trip to the bathroom.

"Hey, where's Holly gotten to?"

"What?" asked Harry, only then realizing his sister was not there. "She said she had to use the loo."

"That was like a half hour ago," Draco pointed out. "So, unless she got lost or fell in, she should have been back here by now." He took a quick peek about the room, to see if maybe she had fallen asleep on Filch's settle, or was playing with the cats by the hearth. No Holly.

"Where could she be? You don't think she's gone to pet the unicorns or something without us?" Harry cried, becoming terribly alarmed.

"She's not supposed to wander around on her own, wasn't that one of the professor's rules?" Draco said.

"Yes, after Cross' expulsion and those other three hurting Magik, Dad made us both promise to stick together and not go anywhere alone." Harry confirmed, his insides doing a panicked dance.

"Maybe she forgot?"

"With her memory, Draco? Not likely." Harry snorted. He pushed back his chair. "Thanks, Mr. Filch, for lunch, it was great. But we really have to find Holly."

"You do that, lads. 'Tisn't like her to go off alone. I hope she's all right." Filch said worriedly. "Good luck to ye. If I happen to see her, I'll send her straight home."

"Thanks, Mr. Filch," Draco replied, then he followed Harry from the room and up the stairs to the entrance hall.

"I hope she's just gone to pet the unicorns or visit Hagrid, then I can give her a piece of my mind for running off and scaring me like that," Harry said as he rushed out of the castle.

"Same here," Draco said. Then he frowned. "Harry, what if . . .this has to do with the vision she Saw?"

Harry was quiet, but he too had thought of that and he prayed he was wrong. But when they got to the corral, they found it was empty. Angrily, Harry swore. "Damn!" Perversely, he felt the need to blame someone, anyone for his sister's disappearance, so he spun on Draco and cried, "This is all your fault, Malfoy! If you hadn't made her try and see in fire, none of this would have happened!"

Draco took a step back, startled to be getting blamed at all. Then his own temper flared. "My fault? Oh, get over it, Snape! I didn't even think she could do it, half the time Squib talents don't work right. And how can you blame me for her vision? I don't even know what she bloody saw!"

"You were the one who made her See it!" Harry accused, his own guilt making him irrational.

Then he whirled around and started to run towards the forest, yelling, "Holly! Holly, where are you?"

"Bloody idiot!" Draco muttered, remaining where he was for an instant. "Totally cracked."

He watched in alarm as Harry drew closer and closer to the forest. Then, to his utter amazement, he saw the other boy run right into it. Draco smacked his hand into his forehead. "Brilliant, Snape! Trust you to go running off into a place we're not supposed to go."

He hesitated, knowing his mother would be furious if she ever learned where he had gone. Bloody hell! Ah well, might as well go after you, Snape. No telling what will happen if I'm not there to watch your back.

He took two steps forward, and suddenly a hard hand came and clamped tight around his mouth, and a voice hissed in his ear, "Be quite and be still, you little bugger!"

Draco struggled, but the arms that held him were strong, and before he could do anything, he found himself tossed over a broad shoulder and carried right into the Forest.

"Hey! What the hell are you doing?" he yelled.

"Taking you to someone," answered the other shortly. "Now quit that squirming and yelling before I give you something to really yell about, brat!"

He brought the palm of his hand down on Draco's bottom, hard.

Draco bit back a yelp, for the smack stung, though it was a great deal less than his father's hand or his cane.

"Now shut your mouth!" ordered the other.

Draco wanted to say something really rude, but his sense of self preservation kicked in and he reminded himself it wouldn't be wise to bait the man while hanging upside down over his shoulder. Instead he tried to catch a glimpse of the other's face as they walked deeper into the forest.

There was something eerily familiar about his captor, the voice, where had he heard it before? Because while he did not have Holly's photographic memory, Draco did have an excellent memory for

auditory cues, and especially voices. He never forgot a voice.

He concentrated hard, thinking back.

"Where are we going, sir?" he asked, trying to get the man to talk more so he could place it.

"Somewhere, kid. You'll know when we get there. Now shut your mouth."

Draco gasped. He remembered where he had heard the voice before. In the Great Hall, during the Ceremony of Shattering. "You're . . .you're the kid who got expelled!" he blurted, then could have kicked himself. "Shelby Cross!"

"So? What's it to you?" grunted Cross.

"But . . .what are you doing back here?"

"None of your business. Now, for the last time, shut up!"

He landed another hard wallop on Draco's bottom.

"Oww!"

"Pansy-arse. Crying over a little tap!" sneered the other.

Draco seethed, for he most certainly wasn't crying. He was angry, and he wanted to punch Cross in the teeth for even implying that. But he remained still and silent, trying to puzzle out why Cross had returned and what it had to do with him.

They were quite deep within the trees now, and Draco felt very uneasy. He had never liked looking at the black oaks from the safe distance of Hagrid's cottage, much less entering them, but there was little he could do about it. There was something dank and dark stirring, it made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. Could this have been what Holly had Seen-him being kidnapped by Cross? If so, he

wished she had told him, so he could have stayed inside the bloody castle.

Then he recalled that Harry and Holly were somewhere in here too, and he hoped they fared better than he was doing.

After about five more minutes he felt Cross slow and then stop. "I brought him, sir. He was easy as pie to snatch. Here you go, sir, safe and sound like I promised. Now can I have the money you promised?"

"All in good time, Mr. Cross. You have done well. Now let me see my son."

Draco felt himself set down and then Cross spun him around to face the one person he had hoped he would never see again-his father.

Lucius was standing before him, wearing nondescript gray robes and casual attire, his white blond hair loose and flowing, his ice blue eyes glinting. "What's this? No greeting, Draco?"

Draco swallowed sharply. "Hello, Father."

Lucius gave a half-smile, lifting the silver dragon head of his cane and putting it gently under Draco's chin. "So your mother stole you from the manor and brought you here. How fortunate that I had spies placed here to inform me if anything unusual came up. For she had no right to take my heir from me."

"What spies, Father?"

"A flawed one, since he was caught," Lucius said angrily. "But though he failed me, I have been merciful." He gestured to the clearing behind him, where a large fire crackled and next to the fire was a rather battered-looking, sullen, indigo-robed Throckmorton. "He still has his uses. For now."

Draco said nothing, he felt his heart quicken in his chest and fear settle in his breast. This was the stuff of his worst nightmares. He was

tempted to run away, but he knew he would never get far. "Father, why are you here?"

"To retrieve you, of course." Lucius answered. "And to settle a few other debts that have come due. Your mother being one of them." He shepherded his son into the clearing and bade him sit in front of the fire. "I may yet grant her the divorce, but never will I permit her to take you away from me. A son belongs with his father."

"Lord Malfoy, may I have my money, sir?" Cross whined.

Lucius looked up at the young wizard, an annoyed look flitting across his face. "One moment, Cross. Don't be so impatient. I may have another task for you. Sit down." He gestured for Cross to be seated next to Throckmorton. Cross obeyed.

Lucius turned back to Draco. "I am glad Cross found you when he did, for now, my son, you are going to witness a powerful piece of dark magic, which will further your education in the Dark Arts."

Draco bit his lip, he wanted to tell his father that he didn't want to be a dark wizard, he didn't need to learn the dark rituals, but he was afraid to say anything like that to Lucius. Lucius did not tolerate sons that were rebellious, and he had wished Draco to be a Death Eater since he was born.

"Victor, shall we begin? You know the ritual spells." Lucius turned to his colleague, whom everyone had thought dead, dinner for a redtailed hawk.

Draco gazed at Throckmorton, carefully concealing the loathing he felt in order to ask a very important question. "How is it you're still alive. You were transformed into a mouse and a hawk grabbed you and flew away."

Throckmorton gave Draco a superior sniff. "I told you before, boy, I have friends in high places. Lucius was watching that day and it was he who took me away, right under the old wizard's nose!" He gave a small chuckle of satisfaction. "And now I shall have my revenge upon them all . . .all the Squib lovers and Mudblood supporters, especially

that miserable shite Snape! Those notes were just the beginning. I hope they scared his brats good and proper!" Throckmorton rubbed his hands together gleefully, like a little boy about to get a present. "Oh yes! I will have my revenge for that bastard's humiliation. Just you wait!"

"Enough, Victor!" Lucius interjected sharply. "Gloat later! Begin the summoning, now!"

Throckmorton rose to his feet, shooting the elder Malfoy a glare when his back was turned. He removed a spellbook from his robes as well as several other pouches, and began moving widdershins around the fire.

"Father, what are you summoning?"

"An ancient host that has not been seen in Britain since the days of Arthur and Merlin, my son. It is called the Wild Hunt. For centuries untold, the Hunt has been bound, held asleep with runes of power and magical bindings, until now. Victor discovered an old text at Durnstrang hidden away in their library, and began studying it. With it we can break the bonds upon the Hunt and set it free to hunt again."

"Hunt what, sir?"

"Well, son, in the elder days the Hunt usually destroyed anything in its path, without mercy, it was led by one known as Herne the Hunter. But this time we shall give it a different quarry-Squibs, particularly one Squib, my darling daughter, Holly Amanda Sinclair!"

Draco was horrified. He could not believe his father would actually call up this . . .abomination . . .simply to kill a child who had never done him any harm. "No! You-you can't!"

"What's this?" Lucius glowered down at him, his face dark with disapproval. "Has your mother taught you sympathy for Squibs, Mudbloods, and half-bloods now? Pah! They were born to be our playthings, expendable."

"She's my sister!"

Lucius grabbed him by the collar and lifted him up off the ground. "Never say that again! She is no more your sister than a dog! She was a mistake that never should have been born, and now I'm going to correct it!" He drew back his hand and slapped Draco hard across the face.

SMACK!

Draco cried out, unable to help himself.

"Be silent!" Lucius ordered, dropping him abruptly.

He landed hard on his bottom and smothered another yelp, putting a hand to his burning cheek.

"Watch and learn, boy. This is for your own good, Draco Anthony Malfoy. No son of mine will ever be a Squib lover!"

He turned to assist Throckmorton and Draco caught Cross smirking at him before he turned away and looked at the trees, blinking hard to hide the tears in his eyes. He had thought he and Narcissa was safe at Hogwarts, but because of Throckmorton's betrayal, their sanctuary had been lost.

I hate you, Father. I hate all of you. He ducked his head to hide the swift burning tears. He prayed suddenly that Holly had returned to the castle with Harry, perhaps the castle's magic would protect them.

Throckmorton was throwing some foul smelling herbs into the fire now, circling and waving his wand and gesturing, chanting some strange words in a language that was not Latin, but something else, something older.

Draco saw the fire turn indigo, then crimson, then a clear color, and finally a sickly rotting green. There was a stench in the air and clouds of smoke began to billow up from the fire.

The boy began to cough, his eyes watering horribly, but he could not look away.

The smell was of rotting vegetation and the fetid odor of the grave, and Draco almost threw up. But still he was frozen, held in place by terror. The sky, what little could be seen through the trees' thick canopy, turned an alarming black shot through with streaks of silver.

Throckmorton was chanting loudly now, and he threw the last of the bag of herbs into the flames.

They roared and flared up to twice a man's height.

Throckmorton drew a sharp silver dagger from his robes, rolled up his sleeve, and cut himself. He squeezed his arm and blood dripped, sizzling and hissing, into the fire.

"Blood of the summoner, to open the way!" he cried in English.

He beckoned to Lucius, who approached and handed him a pale bone.

"Bone of the quarry, to set the track!"

Throckmorton tossed the bone into the fire.

Then Lucius was motioning for Cross to approach Throckmorton.

"What for? What do I know about this ritual?" whined the older boy, looking rather scared and awed at the same time.

"Just do it!" bellowed Lucius, jerking Cross to his feet and shoving him next to Throckmorton. He held Cross firmly by the arm.

Throckmorton whirled, his eyes shining with a queer intent.

Cross gasped, started to back away, but the other wizard grabbed his hair, bent his head back, and swiftly slit the other's throat with the dagger.

"Blood of a sacrifice, to give strength to the Hunt!" He made a gesture and then Cross's body was levitated into the flames.

Then Lucius stepped forward and linked hands with Throckmorton and chanted the final spell to awaken the Wild Hunt.

The fire began to whirl and spin, or perhaps Draco's head was doing the spinning.

Then came a huge explosion and suddenly Draco heard the insane shrieks and bloodthirsty wails of over a dozen doomed souls. From out of the smoke came a large man with a stag's antlers astride a roan horse. He was followed by a dozen white dogs with hellfire eyes and red ears.

"Who dares awaken me from my rest?" demanded Herne.

"We do," intoned the two wizards. "By right of magic and blood sacrifice we claim dominion over the Hunt, and bid you ride again, until your quarry is caught and destroyed."

Herne stiffened. "Thou art proud and impertinent. However, thou hast the book and the power, and so I am bound to obey. What quarry shall we bring down this night?"

Lucius tossed a lock of hair into the fire. "This. And anyone else you wish that tries to hinder you. Now go! I bid you ride, Lord of the Wild Hunt!"

Herne dipped his head a fraction, then turned his steed about and urged it away.

More spectral hunters burst from the fire, all armed with swords, bows, knives and other weapons, all of them with burning crimson eyes, they surged in a never-ending stream from the fire and followed Herne yelling and screeching.

Draco shut his eyes. He could do nothing now except pray. For if Holly was not in the castle, then she was doomed. Unless Severus could save her. And Harry as well, for Draco knew the other boy would probably be right beside his sister, wherever she was.

He tucked his knees up to his chest and buried his face behind them, trembling uncontrollably, silent tears of anguish and horror falling unnoticed down his bruised face. Mother, where are you? I wish you'd come and get me away from here.

Okay, who wants Draco to be right and have Severus save Holly?

I'm of two minds about the way to end this, so I'd appreciate your input greatly. Let me know when you review so I can decide. Thanks!

Hunter's Quarry

Holly ran as fast as she could down the dirt track that began at the edge of the forest. Hagrid had told both Snape children on numerous visits that staying on the track was the safest path through the dark oaks, though that didn't mean that nothing could happen while you were on it. The wind had picked up as she moved, and now it tugged relentlessly at her hair, snarling it into unmanageable tangles. It swirled through the trees with a mournful wail, making her shiver, and the branches rustled loudly, clattering like a legion of poltergeists.

She stumbled once in her headlong flight, an overgrown root tripping her, but she quickly scrambled to her feet, ignoring her scraped palms. Soon there would be more for her to worry about than stinging hands. The sky had now darkened to something resembling dusk, even though it was still late afternoon. There were no birds singing, and all the small animals had ran and hid deep in their burrows.

The stillness was broken by the harsh caw of a raven, to Holly it sounded like it was screaming Beware! Beware! She recalled that Valina had once told her that ravens flew to warn those who dwelled in the forest of impending danger. Valina had been a master herbalist and also seemed to possess an instinctive understanding of animals, both domestic and wild. "It's a gift of my ancestors," she had told her daughter once. I wish you were here, Mum. But maybe I'll see you soon, if . . .if my vision was true.

She felt a terrible feeling go through her, part terror, part foreboding, it froze her blood and made her knees tremble. Something had been unleashed, she could sense it. The earth shook and she could hear the yelping and howling of hounds upon a scent and the drumming of hooves and the blowing of the hunter's horn.

Holly ran, her breath catching, ran as she had never run before.

Directly in front of her, she heard a wolf howl.

"Silver! Oh, Silver!" she half-sobbed.

Then the gray wolf was in front of her, growling softly and rubbing his great head along her chin. She clutched him to her and wept softly. "I'm so sorry! I wish I could stay here, but they're coming for me! Can you hear them?"

The wolf stiffened as the awful baying increased. He growled warningly, his amber eyes gleaming.

Then she heard a new voice. "Holly! Holly, where are you? Holly!"

"No, oh, no!" she moaned.

Silver gave a short crooning sound and Holly patted him. "Now there's two of us for you to protect, except . . . Go to Harry, Silver! Go! I'll . . .I'll wait here."

The big wolf took two steps away, back down the trail, then glanced back over his shoulder and barked sharply, as if to say Stay there and don't move! I'll be back!

Then he ran silently down the trail, following Harry's panicked voice.

He caught up to the other child in a few seconds, Harry was not as far behind Holly as it had seemed, and he too hugged the great wolf in relief. "Silver! Thank Merlin you found me! There's something . . .something wicked in the forest, I can feel it. And we've gotta find Holly, before something bad happens!"

Silver suddenly looked down the path, where the unearthly screeching wails were coming, and lowered his head, snarling furiously. He gave a sharp howl, filled with a terrible urgency, then he turned back and stood before Harry. He nudged the small wizard hard, then lay down on the ground.

Harry's brow wrinkled in puzzlement. "Silver, this is no time for a nap! What are you doing? We've got to find Holly!"

Silver barked, looking at the boy and moving his head in an unmistakable indication.

"Huh? You want me to get on you? To-to ride you?"

Another nod and a soft snarl. Hurry!

Harry shrugged, then cautiously straddled the wolf's back. He gripped the thick loose fur on Silver's neck and wrapped his legs about the wolf's barrel. "Okay, I just hope I don't fall o-o-ff!" he yelped as Silver stood and then launched himself forward, running in great bounding leaps, his nose telling him Holly was somewhere ahead of them.

Harry gasped and clung, the wolf could really run, and at first he was afraid he was going to lose his grip, but then he slowly adjusted and started to move with the big predator. "Run, Silver!" he urged the wolf.

As soon as Silver had vanished down the trail, Holly turned and made her way deeper into the wood, crying silent tears of desperation. There was no hope left. This was what she had Seen in the vision.

And then Silver was there, with Harry upon him, and Harry was yelling, "Holly! There you are! Quick, get on!"

"Harry! No, please! I can't." She gazed up at him with a mixture of relief mixed with dread.

"Yes, you can. Come on, Holl! Before the . . .the bad thing comes!" He held out a hand.

She shook her head. "You don't understand! I can't come! Silver, take Harry and leave! Please!"

"No! I'm not leaving you here!" Harry shouted. "You're my sister!"

"Then you'll die!" Holly screamed. "I Saw it! That's what I Saw in the fire!"

"I don't care! You come with me, Holly, right bloody now!" Harry ordered. "All or nothing!"

Before Holly could protest again, Silver snapped at her, his teeth just grazing her calf. His amber eyes bored into hers and she understood

then that nothing would make them leave her. Stop this foolishness and get on my back! Now!

"Holly, come on! They're getting closer!"

"All right." She took her brother's hand and he swung her aboard Silver's back. She clung to him, shivering. "Maybe . . . maybe I was wrong."

Harry nodded, and then Silver began to run, veering off the path and through the trees and gorse.

"Where are we going?" she cried.

"I don't know! I hope it's somewhere safe." Harry panted.

Behind them, they could hear the hounds coming closer.

Silver laid his ears back and continued running hard.

"I don't think we can outrun them," Holly said. "In my vision, the hunt caught us. It's some kind of ghosts and evil dogs."

"Well, maybe it'll be different this time. Seers don't always see true." Harry said, clinging hard to Silver.

The big wolf jumped over a fallen log, sprinted through a stream, never slowing. He was attempting to run in a circle, using his knowledge of the forest to try and circle back and get free of the wood so he could get to the castle, where the wards might be strong enough to halt the progress of the Wild Hunt.

Remus knew that was what hunted them, he had read the legend in the library at Hogwarts as a student and again as newly fledged Auror for his Academy training. But the Hunt had been locked away for centuries, he thought, his breath rasping in his throat. Until now. Somehow, dark magic had freed them from their eternal sleep, and now they had chosen Holly as their quarry.

Silver slowed a little, trying to husband his strength, for though possessed of magical endurance, he was not immortal, and the cursed spectral hunters and the one who led them were tireless, relentless, and no one in living memory had ever escaped the Wild Hunt.

But Silver was determined to try. He quickened his pace, ignoring the eager cries of the pack of hell hounds, Harry and Holly clinging to him like two burrs.

* * * * *

It was the last period before he went back to his quarters to tutor Draco and his two children, and Severus was thankful for it. Something was causing his magic to prickle warningly, and it only responded that way if dark magic were being used in a great quantity somewhere nearby. He had developed that sensitivity to dark workings when he had become a spy and took the dark brand. The brand had long since gone dormant, but it still tingled on occasion in the presence of dark magic.

Right then it was doing more than tingling, it was itching enough to drive him mad. He surreptitiously rubbed his arm under the cover of his robes and swore roundly. Who in Merlin's name was drawing so heavily on the lefthand path? Well, he knew of one dark practitioner who might have done so, but he wasn't near the school last Snape knew. Of course, that didn't mean a damn thing, considering it was Lucius.

He walked around, monitoring the small group of NEWT seventh years, noting in relief that all seemed to be going well. Considering the hell he'd gone through earlier with his double potions, he was ready to dismiss this class early just on principle. All of them were serious potions students, industrious, obedient, and not inclined to idiotic pranks or distractions.

Last class, he had two melted cauldrons from students not paying attention and misreading instructions, and three getting splattered with Swelling Solution due to a prank by two of their fellow classmates, Gryffindors on Slytherins. They had promptly received

zeros and detention with him tomorrow evening, where he was planning on having them re-do the lab again and then pickle rat spleens.

The itching increased and now Severus also felt a sudden stirring in the air and a pressure like thunder about to be released. He scowled, someone was summoning something, and from the feel of it, not a simple imp or hellion, but something far greater.

Several of the students felt it too, and looked up uneasily.

Then there came a tremendous crack of sound and a smell like lightning.

All seven students jumped and one cried out, "Professor, what's happening? Something's wrong!"

"Did something blow up?" cried another, a Ravenclaw, her face ashen.

"It wasn't me!" muttered a Gryffindor, who had once been known for pulling pranks as a first year.

"Maybe the castle's collapsing!" moaned a Hufflepuff.

"Quiet, all of you!" Snape hissed. "Whatever has happened has nothing to do with you. Finish your solutions and bottle them, then go back to your common rooms."

"But sir . . ."

"Do as I say, Mr. Jones!" snapped the Potions Master. "I am sure the Headmaster has it under control." Actually, Severus was sure Albus had sensed the summoning too, but whether or not he knew anything more was debatable.

Five minutes later, all the students had finished decanting and labeling and had cleaned up their workstations and left.

Severus put their products in a cabinet, he would grade them later, then he Floored to Albus's office.

He discovered the Headmaster pacing about and looking very grave. The twinkle was gone from his eyes, and Severus knew that was a bad sign. Albus was an optimist and when he quit smiling it meant trouble . . .big trouble.

"Ah, Severus! I was just about to call you, my boy."

"Albus, what is going on? I can feel a dark summoning, it's set off my brand," Severus hissed, quickly casting a Silencing Charm over the office.

"I know. I can feel it too, and I fear we are in grave danger. For that summoning was no ordinary one, to call up a lesser ghost or demon. No, whoever performed that ancient ritual was intent upon calling up the Wild Hunt."

"The Wild Hunt?" Severus cried. "But Albus, the Hunt has been bound for centuries and all the tomes with spells to summon it were destroyed long ago."

"Not all, Severus. There was one that was never found, though it was sought after for many years. It had been hoped it was lost for good, but that is no longer the case. In centuries gone by, the Hunt was usually called upon Halloween. This time, however, it has been summoned out of season, to be set upon a specific quarry."

"But what quarry?" Severus wondered.

Just then there came a pounding upon the door of the office, and Narcissa's frantic voice emerged from beyond the door. "Headmaster, I need to speak with you, please! My son has gone missing! Please, let me in!"

The door swung open at Albus's gesture, and a frantic Narcissa entered. Her normally coifed blond hair was hanging down untidily over her face and her bright blue eyes were glistening with unshed tears. Her normally neat robe looked as if she had caught it in a

bunch of thorns, it was wrinkled and the hem was dirty. "Severus! Oh, thank the Goddess you're here too. Draco is missing, I can't find him or Holly or Harry anywhere!"

"Narcissa, my dear, calm down," Dumbledore began.

"What do you mean, you can't find them, Cissa?" Severus cried. "They're not in my quarters?"

"No. Nor in mine. And I checked the hall and your classroom, I thought they might have come to you for something, but they were nowhere. I even went down to Hagrid's, but he hasn't seen them all day, and there's an odd feeling in the air and something dark upon the wind." Narcissa was shaking, small tremors that made her twitch.

"They were supposed to be helping Filch in a storeroom this morning and afternoon," Severus recalled. "Have you spoken to him?"

"No . . . Oh I do hope they're with him . . ."

Severus did too. The Wild Hunt unleashed and his children gone missing . . . It was the stuff of nightmares, indeed, it had been his nightmare a week past, he remembered and a sickening premonition surged through him. Please, let it not be so . . . "Albus, if you'll excuse me, I need to go and find my children. I shall return to you once they are found and help you discover who is behind this."

"Go, Severus. But be careful." Albus waved him off, knowing the younger wizard would never consent to stay put if his children were in danger. And if what he feared was true . . . they were in danger of becoming the Hunt's quarry.

"What's going on?" Narcissa asked as they made their way down the stairs.

Severus told her as they half-ran down the corridor to Filch's set of rooms. "If I had to guess, I would say Lucius is behind this. Or perhaps Throckmorton."

"But he's dead! The hawk ate him!"

"Did it? Or was that what we were led to believe?" Severus asked coldly. "I didn't see the mouse being swallowed. It could have been a trick. Do you know if Lucius ever had an Animagus form?"

"Uh . . . I think he may have, but he never told me what it was." Narcissa looked faintly ill.

"Well, if it was a hawk, then Throckmorton isn't dead," Severus said grimly. They had reached Filch's rooms and Severus knocked on the door. "Argus, it's Professor Snape."

Filch opened the door. "Aye, sir? What can I do for ye?"

"Do you know where Holly, Harry, and Draco are?"

"Y'mean they haven't come back yet?" Filch asked, alarm written all over his face.

"Back yet? Where did they go?" demanded Snape.

"The two boys went off lookin' for your little girl, sir." Filch quickly told them how Holly had left and not returned and the boys had figured she had gone to the corral to pet the unicorns. "I haven't seen 'em since, sir. But Holly's kitten is still with me." He pointed to where Magik was sleeping in Mrs. Norris's cat bed.

"Let Magik stay with you, Argus," Severus said. "Come, Cissa. I shall cast a locator spell once we have reached the corral with the unicorns and see where it leads."

He led the witch from the castle at a dead run.

By the time they reached the corral, the sky had become a deep purplish black streaked with silver flashes of lightning, a harbinger of destruction and evil the Hunt brought in its wake. The air was heavy, as if laden with storm clouds and the aura of blood magic was so thick you could have cut it with a knife. Snape's arm was itching and burning like mad, not quite as bad as when Voldemort used to

summon the spy through the Mark, but it resonated to the dark pulse of magic.

From far away they could hear the echoing cries of the spectral hounds and the yells of the hunters as they stalked their quarry.

"Where rides the Wild Hunt, there rides Death," Narcissa hissed, her face drained of color.

Inside the corral, the unicorns were restless, the fillies cowering and neighing in fear and the mares snorting and stamping, their horns lowered threateningly.

There was no sign of the children.

Severus drew his wand and cast a locator spell.

Almost immediately he felt a persistent tug, off to the east . . .right into the Forbidden Forest.

"Dear sweet Merlin!" he groaned. "They've gone into the Forest."

"What? But why?"

"I don't know. But they're somewhere in there." Severus said. "And so is the Hunt."

Narcissa looked as if she were about to be ill. "Gaia preserve them! We have to find them, Severus! Anything could be happening to them. They could be lost, or hurt, or . . ." she didn't finish her sentence, but they both knew how it ended.

"Yes, but how can we find them quickly? It's too dangerous to fly into the forest and Apparating will do us no good either. But we need to find them fast."

He gazed about, in a hopeless moment of indecision, and it was then that one of the mares neighed sharply. Severus turned to look at her, and saw that she was kneeling down, her front hooves stretched out before her in a reverence.

"What the bloody hell . . .?" he gasped, for unicorns never revered a wizard unless they wished them to mount, and no wizard had ridden a unicorn in over a century.

"Severus!" Narcissa cried, indicating the other mare. "Look! She wants me to mount."

Shocked, Snape just stared at the unicorn, until the mare blew out sharply and trumpeted. Then he opened the gate and entered the corral. "It would seem, Cissa, that we are being given a great privilege. Perhaps they wish to help us find our children."

He approached the unicorn cautiously, thinking that he had never ridden anything save a broom before and praying he didn't end up breaking his neck.

The unicorn looked him right in the eyes and snorted, indicating her back with a swift toss of her horned head.

Severus threw a leg over her and sat down stiffly, trying to grip the silken hide with his legs as best he could. He felt like a two-year-old trying to straddle a rocking horse, it was so awkward.

But then the unicorn rose and something odd happened. Severus felt a feeling of peace settle about him and he relaxed and had no more fear of falling off the unicorn. He knew that no matter how fast the unicorn ran, he would remain on her back.

Narcissa was already mounted on the other mare, looking as if she had been born to the saddle. Being a pureblood, she had riding lessons as a small child, riding being considered a noble activity. She stared at Severus in awe. "I . . .didn't know you could ride, Severus."

"I can't, but I'll manage." Snape replied, fisting a hand in the flowing mane.

"I didn't think unicorns permitted men on them," Narcissa muttered.

Severus didn't care a whit about the old legends. "Come on! Let's move!"

The two unicorns turned, whickered comfortingly to their foals, then galloped straight at the corral fence.

Before Severus had time to blink, they had soared easily over the fence and landed on the other side. In two strides they were racing across the grass and into the forest, Severus leaning on his mount's neck and whispering directions in her ear.

The unicorns ran so gracefully and swiftly it seemed as if they were flying, their silver hooves hardly touching the earth, yet even so Severus prayed they would be in time.

* * * * *

Herne could feel they were getting close to their quarry, despite its ability to run faster than he thought possible. He could smell the fear and the tender innocence of the girl he had been compelled to mark as prey, and it left a bitter taste in his throat. In all the centuries he had led the Hunt, never had he hunted one so innocent. He generally chose quarry that was filled with hate or had committed a terrible crime or was bloated with evil, that way when they finally killed them at hunt's end, they would become part of his huntsmen, bound and cursed to hunt eternally and never know rest or surcease from pain, as befit their wickedness in life. He alone was actual flesh and blood and not a spectral revenant.

He was bound by a curse of one he had loved and lost long and long ago, when the world was new and wizards had just begun to leave their solitary towers and form academies like the one that rested upon the hill beyond the forest. Cursed with immortality, he had ridden at the head of the Wild Hunt for so long he had almost forgotten what he once was. Almost, but not quite.

And he did not like this quarry he was forced to pursue. The death of innocent children had never sat well with him, though sometimes such a death was inevitable, if the child had been caught out after dark upon Samhain Eve. Still, the summoning bound him to obey his

summoner, and thus he had no choice but to seek out the child and give her a hunter's death.

The horned head dipped and the Master of the Hunt sighed. His riders and hounds would be sated only with blood and they did not care whose blood they spilled, so long as they could feed off the quarry's death and pain and blood.

He exhaled sharply, tasting the wind. The scent of a great wolf now mingled with that of two children, an odd combination. But no matter. He would fulfill his contract . . . he was bound by the magic that had summoned him from sleep. Unless something else occurred to make him break it, though that was unlikely. There were only two ways a contract could be broken.

One was if the quarry were related by blood to Herne himself and the other was by a willing substitute. And he doubted if any of his get now remained upon the earth, and few there were who give up their lives for another, knowing what fate awaited them.

He heard the hounds bay loudly, the quarry was in sight, and the spectral dogs needed no urging. They swept across the ground, red eyes burning with a dreadful need to rend and tear.

Only to be met by a gigantic wolf whose coat gleamed molten silver in the moonlight.

The wolf bared his teeth and snarled, and the hounds checked and then attacked the animal en masse.

The wolf danced away, avoiding the pack, then sprang in to grab a hound by the neck and shake it hard. The dog, half specter though it was, yelled in pain as the wolf's teeth tore through its white hide, and then the wolf jerked hard to the right and there came a crunch and the hound was dead, its neck broken.

The wolf howled triumphantly and tossed the hound aside, preparing to fight the next challenger.

Behind the wolf huddled two children, a dark-haired boy and a blond-haired girl, cold and terrified.

Herne galloped up, avoiding the wolf and the hounds battling, and drew rein in front of the two children. His quarry had been found. He drew back his great long bow, prepared to send an arrow mercifully into the girl's heart.

He stared for an instant into her sapphire eyes.

And checked, lowering his bow. "It cannot be," he muttered.

At the same moment there was a flash and the two wizards who had summoned him and a blond-haired child appeared in the clearing as well.

"What are you waiting for? Kill her!" cried the blond one.

Herne swung on him, piercing the dark sorcerer with his glowing emerald eyes. "I decide the Final Death, not thee. Now be still!" He turned away, fixing his gaze once more upon the fragile girl standing half-defiantly before him, one hand gripping that of a slightly taller boy.

The rest of the Hunt swirled and yammered behind him, crying out for blood, but Herne held up a hand and they were still. He cracked the long whip at his belt, summoning the pack to him, and the hounds obeyed, snarling and whining reluctantly, for the bloodlust was upon them, but they came back to crouch about his steed's hooves.

The wolf, bleeding from over a dozen cuts, managed to limp over to the children and place himself between them, defiance in his eyes, though Herne sensed he was close to death.

"No! Silver!" cried the girl. "Oh, why didn't you run when I told you?" She and the boy knelt to stroke the great head, choking back tears.

Compassion for the beasts of the wood, the Hunter thought proudly, then shook his head. He had been sent to slay this one, and any others who got in his way.

"Child, thou were marked as my quarry, and thus I am bidden to take thee. However, I would know something first. What is thy name?"

"Her name is Holly Amanda Sinclair and she is my daughter," came a new voice. "And if you must have a sacrifice, you may take me instead. A life for a life."

Holly whirled, stricken, to see Severus and Narcissa ride up on Duchess and Dancer. "No, Severus! Don't! Then who will save Harry?"

Severus froze, his eyes darting from his daughter to his son, both in mortal peril. His features twisted as if he were in agony. No! How can I choose?

Throckmorton erupted into laughter. "Poor Snape! Trapped, you are, Potions Master, between your son and the worthless Squib you took into your home! Save me, Daddy! Only you can't save them both! Who then shall you choose? Either way . . .you lose!"

"Be still, you fool!" Lucius shouted, keeping a tight hold on his son, whose face had lit up at the appearance of the professor and his mother.

"Lucius, you bastard!" Narcissa shrieked. "Give me back my son, you perverted child stealer!" She pointed her wand and a glowing blue ball of flame surged from it, making Lucius twist hard to avoid getting hit by her spell.

"Control yourself, wife!" spat her husband. "You are unfit to be a mother to my son, and therefore he stays with me."

"No! A child belongs with his mother, thus it was and thus it ever shall be!" Narcissa cried. "Now, for the last time, give me my child! Or suffer the consequences!"

Lucius laughed mockingly. "What, do you think you are a match for me, darling? Have you grown a spine at last? For if so I shall enjoy breaking it. Go home, Cissa. Be content with the divorce settlement, I was more generous than you deserved." He raked her up and down

with a scathing look. "Why don't you shack up with old Snape, then the two of you can weep over the loss of your children together?" He thrust Draco at Throckmorton, who grabbed the boy and held him tightly. Then the master of Malfoy Manor growled, "Finish this, Herne the Hunter! The quarry is at bay, now take her! I command it!"

But the Horned One reined in his steed, and fixed the wizard with a hardened glower that made Lucius flinch and take a step back. "Silence! I am Master of my Hunt and I decide when the quarry is to be taken, not thee, insignificant worm! Thou may have summoned me, but I bow my head to no mortal! Lest thou forget, I am the God of the Wood, and all who dwell here pay homage to me. Before the sacrifice is decided, there is a tale I must tell. Hark, and be still!"

And at those words, a veil of silence settled about the clearing, rendering all within it mute, save for Herne, who nodded and then began to speak.

Thanks for all of your reviews!

Next: Herne has a strange tale to tell

The Hunter's Tale

"Long ago, before this island knew the rule of great King Arthur and his advisor, the one called Merlin Ambrosius, whom thou wizards revere as the best of thy kind, I was born to a minor lordling who held land at the edge of the great forest of the March, a vast wood that hardly any could see to the edge of, it spanned nearly the breadth of this island. It knew no earthly master, and was home to all manner of birds, beasts, and the Folk of the Wood-what thou hast called fairies-the Children of Danu. They dwelled deep with the March's heart, where no mortal was ever permitted to go, unless specifically invited.

"As my father's heir I was sent to be schooled by the druids, for such was common in that time, the druids were respected as keepers of law and knowledge of the earth, wise and just, and possessed of the mystic power that flowed throughout all things. I was seven when I came to the nemetons and eighteen when I left them, having proven myself skilled at mediating and hunting and the druids had taught me much of the ways of the forest and all that dwelled there and the wood witches who lived with them taught me the goodly arts of healing and magical divining, for I too was heir to the powers of the mystic.

"But it was not my fate to become as they, druid and wizard, I was heir to Wood's Edge, and I returned to my father's keep to rule my people. When my father passed, I became lord in his stead, and ruled thus for many years. My greatest passion was the hunt and often I could be found deep in the March, with my boon companions, hunting deer, boar, and elk, and even times bear and other dangerous creatures, those who dared trespass in my domain and slay my flocks.

"I was content, save for one thing. I had no wife and therefore no heirs. Yet I felt no particular hurry to marry. One Midsummer Eve, I was celebrating with my people, and a stranger came to the fire. She was made welcome, and I danced with her. But she was no ordinary maid, but one of Folk of the Wood, come to see what mortal revels were like.

"She named herself to me as Maeve, daughter of the Winter King, and in one glance I was ensnared, desiring her above all others.

Such is the spell the fae cast over mortals, even one such as I, who had been schooled in resisting such magic. I learned later that she had been sent by her kin to seduce the lord of Wood's Edge, and this she did. She played with me, teasing and taunting, and I, poor foolish boy that I was, mistook her shallow affection for love.

"Night and day, I spent with her, forsaking even my duties as lord of my land, I forgot all save her when she appeared. I loved her, wildly and passionately, more even than I did my beloved hunt, and I swore she loved me as well. I would have taken her for my lady wife, but she kept refusing, promising me she would wed me anon.

"I had forgotten that the Folk of the Wood are often capricious and they love to play with mortals, but rarely do they ever allow themselves to love one. I hunted with Maeve and visited her people with her, in the heart of the wood. They were cordial, but maintained a distance that I recalled only later. I was mortal, I could never be one of them.

"I knew my mortality frightened Maeve, so I asked if she could make me immortal. She consented, but first she made me swear a great oath-to forever preserve the wood that was her home. I swore, for I believed that would end all her refusal of my suit.

"She granted me long life and perfect health, not a true immortality, but it was enough for me. I asked her once more for her hand, but she just looked at me and laughed. Angered by her mockery, I left her, and while I was out riding off my temper, I heard a cry for help.

"I rode a short distance, and discovered a young maid surrounded by four brigands, who were intent on robbing her of possessions and virtue. I killed all of them and then asked the maid her name. She told me she was the daughter of a local chieftain, one who owed fealty to me. Her name was Valina, and I took her up on my horse and brought her back to her father's house.

"They made me welcome, inviting me to dinner, and I could not refuse. I spent a very pleasant time with them, and I realized then what I had been missing all of this time, flirting with the Winter King's daughter. They were honest folk and Valina was charming and

though she was not beautiful like the fae, there was something that drew the eye.

"I had intended to punish my fickle lover Maeve by staying away for a month or two. I had never planned on doing anything more than staying inside my own hall. But after meeting Valina, I could not stay away from her home. There was something there . . .some feeling, some sense of belonging, that called to me as not even the palaces of the Fair Folk did. Their beauty was mostly artifice, but this . . .this was real, as real as the human heart.

"I am sure thou canst guess what happened then. I fell in love with Valina and she with me. And this time my proposal of marriage was not rejected. We became man and wife in a small grove, bound and married by a druid ritual, and I was so incredibly happy I nearly died.

"Our wedding night was the stuff of dreams and poets, and she conceived nearly instantly, for the fairy gift had blessed me with fertility. I sent a messenger to Maeve's kin, informing her that I wished to break off our liaison, as it was doomed to fail and I already had a mortal wife and an heir on the way.

"But Maeve was off dallying in another part of the realm with her Irish kin and she didn't return until my wife had given birth to two healthy babes, a son and a daughter.

"When she discovered what had gone on in her absence, she was full of fury. She considered me her . . .own property, I think is the best way to describe it, and to find that not only had I not been languishing over her, but that I had replaced her in my heart was something she could not abide. The Fair Ones have always considered themselves above us, and while she herself dallied with other men, she could not stand that I had found another whom I loved more.

"She came to me that night, as I walked over my fields, inspecting them for the spring planting, and she accused me of being a faithless cad, ungrateful, a wretch whom she wished had never drawn breath. Nothing I said would cause her jealous rage to abate, and my explanation, while perfectly rational, incited her to greater fury.

"Some of my people heard her and came out, armed, to drive away the madwoman who threatened their lord. They refused to leave when I bid them, they were too loyal and concerned for my safety. In the end they paid for it.

"For she cursed me then, using her power to bind me to the land and the wood forevermore, she could not remove the gift she had given me, but she could deny me all pleasures save one. "Hunt, thou faithless one! Hunt till thou sicken from the carnage, thee and thine, any quarry thou please, and know that thee shall never know rest and those who know the words of summoning may call thee forth and thou must hunt as they bid-save for two instances. Thou art forbidden to shed the blood of thy own kin, and thou mayest accept a willing substitute, should one present itself. Otherwise thy shall pursue endlessly until the quarry is dead, Herne the Faithless Hunter! Thus say I, Maeve, princess of Danu, Lady of Winter, Oberon's daughter."

"And after cursing me, she cursed my followers, only them she killed and caused to rise again as specters, forever bound to a half-life, doomed to hunt in my train, eternal rest denied forevermore. The Wild Hunt, she called her creation, and the first thing she set us on was the one thing I loved best in all the world-my wife."

For the first time since he had begun narrating to his spellbound audience, Herne paused, and a shiver wracked him. In his eyes were a torment and an agony that was nearly unfathomable. But he soon gathered himself and went on, though his voice was hoarse with centuries of misery.

"So then, I was forced to hunt and kill the one who held my heart, I could not fight Maeve's dictate, not then, when the curse was newly set. She knew, of course, wicked bitch . . .aye, she knew what it would cost me to harm the woman I loved, the mother of my children . . .but the wrath of a fairy woman scorned knows no bounds. She wished her rival dead and gone, and I was to be the instrument of her revenge.

"She called my Valina from the keep then, and bade me hunt her down and I . . .may the old gods forgive me . . .hunted my beloved like a beast through the March until I slew her.

"No one knew what had occurred, the dogs tore her to pieces, and no body was ever found. It was thought she suffered from an odd malady common to women who had just given birth, and she wandered away in a depressed fit and disappeared or drowned.

"But my children were safe, and I made certain to put magical safeguards in place so they would never be taken in by a fae's wiles or glamours. That much I could do, but my horrible crime preyed upon my mind . . .night and day I was haunted by it . . .there was no rest, no peace, and in the end I began to hunt and never stopped. I had killed my heart that day, and become a monster, damned for all of time. I was quite mad then, and it was in that state that the Wild Hunt became a synonym for terror and death and evil. It was then the horns of a stag emerged on my head, the sign of madness, and at the same time a sign of my utter surrender to the magic of the wood.

"Only one thing saved me from becoming a ravening beast . . .and that was my children and their children. They had inherited my gifts, as marked by them as ever I had been. I was still bound to them by blood, and once in a great while I would return to my birthplace and watch them, hidden always, and remember what I had been, and the beloved I had held and promised to love forever.

"For time out of mind I was a harbinger of doom, Death's Messenger, until Merlin called upon me to be something more, to help him in the final fight for Britain against the Powers of the Dark wizards, witches, and dark fae led by Morgause, Arthur's half-sister, the Queen of Air and Darkness. He gave me a choice then, to stand against them or sleep forever, bound by magic so strong it could only be undone by a single spell in the Book of Night. I agreed, and thus was redeemed of my great crime. Thus began the legend of Herne the Hunter, the Lord of the Wood, who was given dominion over all the birds and beasts and all that grows within the forest. People began to worship me as a god, a savage unpredictable god, to be sure, but nevertheless, I was revered, and could grant small blessings to those who worshipped me.

"I fought for a time, and every Samhain Eve I rode at the head of the Hunt, and sought the evil and the cursed, they swelled my ranks,

punishment for their crimes, but I knew that my curse would someday betray me, and I would turn upon those I called allies once more. Rather than risk such a betrayal again, I requested I be allowed the enchanted sleep. My request was granted, and thus I have slept, and the Hunt with me, while the world turned and was remade again."

The Hunter's eyes, fiery emeralds in his lean face, burned as they alighted upon Lucius Malfoy.

"Until now, when thee hast called me from my sleep and bade me hunt this child-this innocent girl, who bears thy blood within her veins. The crime of kinslaying is the most heinous of all, and yet thee would commit it without blinking. In the name of Gaia, why?"

Lucius coughed, then managed to say, "She is nothing to me, I have cast her out. She is no longer my daughter, useless Squib that she is."

"Cold, thou art, as cold as Maeve, thy heart is flawed, to so condemn thy own to such a fate," declared Herne angrily. "And more, for thee too committed the sin I did, and killed thy lover, I see in thy mind, only thou hast no regret at all, unnatural creature! For that alone thou art damned. But thee made a grave mistake, Lord Malfoy, for not only is she kin to thee, but she bears my blood as well."

"WHAT!"

The Hunter bared his teeth in a terrible parody of a smile. "Indeed. For Sinclair is the line of my daughter, Hestia, and I can always sense a descendant of my blood. This child is my many-times great-granddaughter, bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh, and thou wouldst have me kill her? Thou awakened me to commit murder of my own kin?" Herne thundered, his rage a tangible thing that rolled about the clearing, slamming into Lucius and Throckmorton like a freight train.

They were knocked face down upon the ground.

"Thy contract is null and void!" roared the irate Hunter, and lightning crackled about his antlers.

His horse reared, hooves lashing out, shrilling a battle cry.

The hell hounds howled, licking their lips, and the rest of the host wailed and cried aloud. "Blood for blood! Blood for blood! Set us free, Master!"

Herne held up a hand, and the Hunt went quiet.

Then he turned back to the wizards before him and said in a voice devoid of any emotion, "Now, we shall discuss the sacrifice I require from thee."

What did you think of Herne's tale? I took the basic premise of the folklore of the Wild Hunt and Herne and added a few things to it.

Next: A sacrifice is needed, but who shall pay the price?

Hunter's Sacrifice

For an endless moment none of them moved, they were too busy absorbing Herne's incredible revelation. All except Throckmorton, who cared naught for anyone save himself. He released Draco abruptly and began to edge backwards out of the clearing. Until a red-eared hound crept up and snarled at him in warning. Throckmorton cringed and shivered, returning to his spot beside Lucius, too much of a coward to risk getting bitten.

Herne pinned him with his gaze and sneered, "Whither thou goest, knave? Think thou can escape my justice? Not in this life, necromancer! Stay and meet thy doom with dignity, if thou knowest yet what that is." His horse, a red roan, trumpeted and stamped a hoof. The Hunter patted it and it stilled. Then he turned to the assembled group of wizards and one witch and said, "As I said before, the contract is void because the quarry I was bound to hunt is unlawful. Yet, a sacrifice is owed, for nothing save blood and souls shall sate my huntsmen and hounds."

Before Herne could continue, Lucius interrupted. "Well, Snape, now's your chance to play the martyr and sacrifice your pitiful life for your child's. Whatever one you choose!" the blond wizard laughed mockingly.

Severus stiffened, and was about to respond, but Herne cut in before he could get a syllable out. "And what makes thou think he is a suitable sacrifice, Lord Malfoy? Willing, aye, but his soul matches that of my descendant, and thus it is almost impossible for the Hunt to claim it."

Lucius roared in laughter. "Snape? A pure soul? Merlin's bloody hat! He is tainted by the Dark Lord's service. He bears the Mark even as I do, the Mark of a Death Eater. How then can he be a 'pure soul'?"

"Whatever outward scars Severus Snape bears, they do not reflect his inner spirit. Else my horned sister there would never have consented to bear him upon her back." Herne said sharply, his eyes narrowing. "And his willingness to sacrifice himself for a child not of his blood, for both his children, shows that he is on the side of the

Light. And I shall not declare him mine enemy, nor accept his sacrifice."

Lucius gaped like a landed fish, his mouth opening and shutting. This could not be happening. In the span of an hour, all of his carefully orchestrated plans were falling to pieces. "You must-he offered and no one else did."

Just then Silver shifted, pulling himself up from the ground with tremendous effort. Blood soaked the ground where he had lain, but he lifted his head proudly and gave a soft growl, looking directly at Herne.

The Hunter dipped his head slightly in respect. "Thy request is noted, wolf-brother, but I shall not accept thy blood either, noble one."

"You cannot do this!" raged Lucius, sensing the situation spiraling out of his control. "I summoned you, you must obey me, Hunter! Take what is offered and be done with it, or else suffer my wrath!"

Herne looked amused, like a parent weathering a disobedient toddler's tantrum. "Thou no longer commands me, Malfoy. I claim breach of contract and thy hold over me is forfeit. There is only one here whose request I shall honor, and that is thine, Holly Amanda Sinclair. What wouldst thou have of me, littling?" he tilted his head towards Holly, who stared up at him in awe.

"Have of you, my lord? Perhaps you may go back to sleep, if that is your wish?"

Herne chuckled, a deep booming bass that rang throughout the clearing. "In good time, child, I shall return to my rest. However, there is the matter of a debt owed. As the one wronged, thou hast the right of accusation. Choose, great-granddaughter, who shall suffer my justice this night?"

Lucius glared at Holly, fury mixed with fear in his breast. But when he spoke again, his voice dripped honey. "Holly, princess, you wouldn't give your father to this madman, now would you? I'm sorry, I didn't mean to set him upon you. It was a mistake, I was angry . . ." Holly

said nothing, simply looked at him with Valina's sapphire eyes, accusing. Lucius began to sweat. "You remember how we used to play together on cold winter nights in front of the fire? I taught you to play chess and Gobstones and Exploding Snap, and I bought you all those pretty dresses and that stuffed kitten you loved so much. Remember how we used to go out for ice cream, and you would sit upon my shoulder and wave to all the other people in Diagon Alley? I used to tell you stories too, and you said I was the best dad in the world . . ."

His honeyed tongue began to work on her, though she knew he was only trying to save his own skin. And yet . . .she did remember those times, the good times before she had lost her mother, when he had been there for her, and she had felt part of a family . . .

"Holly, your mother loved me too, she wouldn't want you to do this," Lucius purred, weaving a spell of persuasion effortlessly.

But he had slipped, his suave tongue had miscalculated.

Abruptly, Holly shook her head and cried, "But you never loved her, Lucius! It was all a lie! You only loved us when we gave you what you wanted, and when I couldn't be what you wanted, you threw me away like a piece of trash! You killed my mum and then left me to die in the street, like a stray dog, frozen to death!" Her little hands clenched into fists. "You never loved me! Never! I was never your princess!" Tears were streaming down her face now, but her eyes remained fixed and resolute.

"That's not true! I take it all back. You can come to live with me at Malfoy Manor, I'll give you whatever you want . . ."

"I don't want anything you could give me, Lucius," she declared coldly, sounding remarkably like her trueblood sire then. "I'm done with lies, and done with you! You're not my father, Lucius Malfoy! Severus Snape is! Want to know why? Because he loves me, even if I am merely a Squib! And he gives me what you never could-a real home and a father I can be proud of!"

"Ah, now there speaks Valina's daughter!" Herne applauded. "Hast thou no reply now, Sir Golden Tongue?"

Lucius sputtered.

"So be it. Well, shall I dispense justice upon this rogue, child?"

"And don't forget Thick-moron there," Holly pointed to the other culprit in the crime. "He summoned you too."

"Indeed." Herne drew himself up and the white lightning flashed from his brow to strike the earth before the two dark wizards with a thunderous CRACK! "Lucius Malfoy and Victor Adolf Throckmorton, thou hast been judged and found wanting, thou art necromancers steeped in all manner of degrading darkness and thou didst murder one of my kin and attempt to murder my other one, Holly Amanda Sinclair Snape, without regret or remorse. Therefore I name thee outcast, rogue, thy life forfeit-"

"Wait, my lord!" Narcissa cried. "I crave a boon before you send him down to hell."

"Go on, lady."

"I have a score to settle with him myself, for trying to kidnap my son and turn him to the lefthand path." Narcissa said grimly, and with that she pointed her wand and shouted a very old spell, one that no witch had used in a decade, or so it was said.

A spark shot out of her wand, and Lucius snorted, acting unconcerned with his wife's vengeance.

Until the spark struck him, and then he went to his knees and screamed in agony.

"Bitch . . .you bitch . . .you have . . .you have . . .unmanned me! How dare you?"

Narcissa nudged her unicorn forward and sneered down at her former husband. "You have never taken me seriously, Lucius.

Perhaps now you will. Payback's a bitch, isn't it?" Then she held out her hand, and Draco came running to her. She swung him aboard Duchess and he hugged her hard. "Are you all right, little dragon?"

"Yes," he muttered into her robe. "What did you cast on Father?"

"A spell that all witches should learn. I castrated him."

Draco winced, but he couldn't really bring himself to feel very sorry for his father, knowing what he had done to the women in his life.

Then Narcissa turned away and trotted back to stand next to Severus on Dancer.

"Is thy vengeance satisfied, my lady?" inquired Herne.

"It is, my lord."

"Well done! Now for the rest of thy sentence." Herne spoke in a soft tone that nevertheless raised the hairs on the back of their necks. "For thy crimes, I declare both of thy lives forfeit. Thou are now my quarry. I shall give thee a five minute head start, a sporting chance, if thou wilt." He cracked his whip and Lucius turned and bolted, getting to the edge of the clearing and transforming into the red-tailed hawk.

Throckmorton turned and ran too, his eyes wild and terrified. "Lucius!" he shrieked. "Don't leave me! Wait for me!"

Hounds and huntsmen chafed at the bit, baying and rattling their spears and bows.

"Five minutes, lads," said Herne, and in his green eyes blazed an unholy eagerness. "Even wings shall not save thee from the wrath of the Hunt, Lord Malfoy." He dismounted suddenly, coming to tower over Holly, who came barely up to his waist. A tender look bloomed for an instant upon his stern face. "Remember, littling, that thou are my blood, and the favor of the wood is always upon thee." He reached into a pouch upon his belt and withdrew a shiny silver brooch of a leaping stag wearing a wreath of mistletoe. It was set with precious rubies for the mistletoe and a single emerald for the stag's

eye. "This was once my crest, when I ruled as lord of Wood's Edge. I give it now to thee, Holly." He pressed it gently into her palm. "A small thing, but it shall protect thee from poisons and if thou are ever in mortal peril, thou may use it to call me, one time only, and I shall come to thy aid." His hand caressed her cheek. "May the blessing of the forest be thine always, child." He bent and his lips grazed her forehead in a brief kiss.

At his touch a golden glow outlined her for a brief instant, then it was gone.

"Farewell, Holly. I must away, the hunt is calling!"

He swung onto his horse with a graceful leap, and the horse reared. Herne put his silver horn to his lips and blew a mighty blast, releasing the hounds. "Away! Away!" he bellowed, and then he and his spectral riders followed the white hounds, pursuing their rightful quarry through the Forbidden Forest, and the mist swirled about them until they were obscured from view, though they could hear the cries long after Herne had departed.

"Think they'll catch them, Dad?" Harry asked, speaking for the first time since Herne had appeared.

"Yes. Nothing escapes the Wild Hunt," Severus answered, then he dismounted and ran forward to embrace both his son and his daughter tightly.

After a long moment, however, Holly said, "But what about Silver? He needs help, those dogs hurt him badly."

The Potions Master released his children reluctantly to stare at the battered wolf, who was lying upon the ground again, the light in his amber eyes fading.

Severus knelt beside the stricken wolf. "Lupin, you heroic imbecile! Why didn't you tell me you were hurt? Great Merlin, you may be almost beyond my skills to heal."

But he would try, for Silver was a Snape too.

Who wants to throw a party now that old Throckie and Lucy are dead?

I do! I do!

Sorry, I'm a bit hyper.

Silver wants YOU to review, every review is a vote for him to live. Let's see if I can get 25 reviews, okay? I only need three more, by the way!

Do that first and then clap your hands and say I believe in Remus three times, okay? Something magical will happen next chapter!

What Is Loved

Yay! 25 reviews!!! Thanks a lot! Please read on . . .the magic is working as promised!

"You can save him, right, Dad?" Harry cried, struggling to keep from bursting into tears. "He can't die . . .he saved us from the demon dogs that would've killed us!"

Severus cast a quick diagnostic, shaking his head sadly. "Harry, I just don't know. Those dogs, they had some kind of venom in their saliva . . .I don't know if my potions can counteract it . . ." It was that and not only the blood loss that was causing the big wolf to go into shock and his heart to beat erratically.

Severus began to summon his strongest antidote, but before he could administer it, a soft white nose nudged him firmly away. "What in Merlin's name . . .?"

Dancer stood next to him, her head lowered. Understanding, the Potions Master moved away, allowing the unicorn to tap the dying wolf three times with her horn.

A silver radiance spread from the horn and enveloped the wolf.

When it faded, the wounds in his chest and side were nearly closed, and he was breathing normally. The mare whuffed gently in the wolf's ear before stepping gracefully backwards.

"A unicorn's horn is proof against poisons, especially those of the undead," Severus muttered, his dark eyes alight with joy. "Thank you, lady." He bowed to her.

Dancer dipped her head once in acknowledgment.

"Silver, you're not completely healed, but the poison is removed from you, and I can complete the process with potions," Severus said, returning the phoenix tear antidote to his potions storeroom and summoning a Blood Replenisher, a Pain Reliever, and Wound Repair Salve.

He poured the first two in two small bowls that he also summoned for Silver to lap, and then rolled up his sleeves and began applying the salve to all the myriad scratches and lacerations that had not been healed by the unicorn's horn.

Silver grimaced at the taste of the potions, but valiantly drank, remaining still as a statue while Snape rubbed the salve on, even allowing the wizard to lift up his paws and rub some on his cracked and bleeding paw pads.

"You nearly ran the skin off your paws, you silly wolf," scolded Snape.

Silver lifted his head from the bowl and gave the other a look. Well, what did you expect me to do, let them kill the children?

"Never mind, Remus," sighed the Potions Master. "You only did what you do best, protect those who cannot protect themselves. Thank you."

Silver barked, clearly delighted at having gotten a thank you from Severus Snape at last. Then he deliberately nuzzled the Potions Master and licked his face.

"Ugh! Wolf, your breath . . .it could knock out a giant!" gasped Snape. "No more liver for you!"

Silver merely grinned and wagged his tail gently.

"Overgrown mutt!" grumbled Snape, but he was smiling slightly.

The children laughed, and Severus banished everything back to his lab and stood up, dusting off his robes. "He's going to be fine."

Holly and Harry cheered, and so did Draco. They all rushed over to hug and pet the gallant wolf.

Narcissa flashed Severus a grin. "I guess it's true, what they say. What's loved, lives."

"Indeed," Severus agreed.

From far away, they heard the strains of a hunting horn sounding the notes of return and the triumphant baying of a pack of hounds. Severus and Narcissa exchanged knowing glances. The Wild Hunt had caught their quarry.

"Come, children, it's time we were going home," Severus called.

Draco came first, mounting easily behind Narcissa.

Harry drew away next, and Severus placed him on Dancer's back.

Holly withdrew from Silver and walked over to him, her sapphire eyes misty. "Thanks for coming for me. I wasn't expecting you to find me, since I'm not supposed to be here in the first place and maybe you wouldn't want to either because I broke your number one rule and you were ashamed of having a disobedient daughter." Two tears made their way slowly down her face.

Severus was shocked. The little girl's frank declaration and her tears nearly broke his heart. He knelt down so he could look into her eyes. "Holly, I will always come for you, do you not know that? You are my life, just like Harry. And I . . . am proud to be your father, Holly Amanda Sinclair. You are more than worthy of being loved, child, even if you did break my number one rule and enter the Forbidden Forest." Then he caught her up in a hug so tight that she gasped. "I love you, little one."

Holly buried her head in his neck, then she said, very quietly, "I love you too, Dad."

Severus could not contain his smile then. She had called him dad, and with that single word had put the specter of Lucius behind her forever, replacing him with a father of her choosing. He carried his daughter to the unicorn and set her behind her brother, then mounted after them. "Dear Merlin, I hope the mare can carry us all," he muttered under his breath.

But Dancer had no trouble navigating the forest with the three Snapes upon her back, and soon they arrived back at Hogwarts, just in time for a late supper with Albus and Mr. Filch in the Headmaster's private quarters, where they told him everything that had happened since Severus and Narcissa had left his office that afternoon.

Both men were suitably impressed by Herne the Hunter and his blood tie to Holly through her mother. "She has an almost royal bloodline, with the Sinclair and the Malfoy lines," Albus mused thoughtfully.

"Ha! There's one in the eye for all those who think a Squib ain't nothing save trash," Filch said, looking pleased as punch.

Dumbledore looked saddened when Draco told them of Cross, and his demise at the hands of Throckmorton and Lucius, used as a sacrifice to summon the Wild Hunt. "I had hoped, even after we had banished him, that he might yet turn to the right path, but alas, he continued down the dark road and in the end it cost him his life. I do not know how I shall break the news to his father, as there is no body left to bury. Poor Shelby! And poor Benjamin, it is the worst thing in the world to lose a child." He pulled out a handkerchief and dabbed his eyes, for any loss of a youngster reminded him sharply of the loss of his own two children, though they had died thirty-five years ago.

By the time they had told the whole tale, the children were half-asleep in their chocolate trifle, and Severus had to nudge Harry awake and Holly too. "Wake up. It's past your bedtime, you two."

Harry yawned, rubbing his eyes. "Dad, are we in trouble for . . .this . . .uh . . . adventure?"

Severus blinked. "We'll discuss that tomorrow, son. Right now I'm too happy to have you both safe and sound to issue any kind of punishment. All's well that ends well." He ruffled Harry's messy hair and hugged the boy. Then he scooped up Holly, who had somehow fallen asleep again, and turned to leave. "Good night, Albus. I'll see you tomorrow at breakfast."

"I look forward to it." Albus said, and the twinkle was back in his eyes. "Well done, my son."

Severus' eyes widened in astonishment, as did Narcissa's. He had long suspected the Headmaster regarded him as a surrogate son, but this was the first time Albus had ever come right out and acknowledged it. "Thank you . . .Father." he managed to say at last. Then he whirled about and practically bolted out the door, followed by a grinning Harry.

Narcissa quickly departed with a sleepy Draco, too astonished for words.

Behind him, Albus chuckled, stroking his beard. "Well, at least he can say it now, eh, Fawkes?" The old wizard said to his familiar. "Took him twenty years to finally say what he felt, but it was worth the wait. I wonder if he'll manage a hug next time, or will I have to wait another twenty years?"

Fawkes trilled lightly, and Albus shook a finger at the bird. "Are you making fun of me, bird? You were the one who made me see that Severus was a good replacement for my Julian all those years ago . . .one time you were right in your several lifetimes . . .At least now I have the grandchildren fate denied me the first time around . . ."

Okay . . .Silver LIVES! Did you like the way he was saved?

But this isn't over yet! There are some more chapters to go still.

Next: Traumatized over the events in the forest, the kids suffer dreadful nightmares, making Severus resort to getting them group therapy with Healer Sue . . .who then insists HE have some too! Can she convince the stubborn professor to take her advice? Yes or no?

Group Therapy

"How many more cauldrons do we have left?" Harry asked from inside the largest one, scrubbing away with the scrub brush, his hands ached even with the dragon hide gloves upon them.

"Just three," Holly replied, looking up from her own, and managing to sound cheerful about it.

"Just three?" Harry groaned. "Merlin, I hope none of the rest of them are as bad as this one. Whatever somebody was trying to brew in here is stuck on like cement."

"Hey, you wanted to do the biggest one instead of three normal ones," Draco reminded him, industriously scrubbing and rinsing out his fourth cauldron. "Besides, it could be worse, Snape."

"How?"

"We could be beaten and scrubbing cauldrons on top of it," Draco answered.

Harry pulled his head out of the huge cauldron and just stared at the other boy. "Draco, how many times do I have to tell you, my father doesn't beat children? Not even over deliberately disobeying him and almost getting ourselves killed." He groaned and stretched. "Right now I would rather he walloped me, my back and my hands are killing me!"

The other two nodded in sympathy, for they were stiff and sore as well from scrubbing out fifteen cauldrons, which Severus and Narcissa had declared was their punishment for their disobedience. They were also grounded for three days.

"Better this than my father's cane though," Draco added, shuddering. "If the Hunt hadn't taken him, that's probably what I'd be getting right now."

"Why?" Harry asked.

"Because I went with Mother instead of refusing her when she came to the manor, and because I talked back to him and told him he shouldn't kill Holly just before he summoned the Hunt. Makes me a Squib-lover in his book, and that's plenty of reason to whip me, at least by his lights. Or it used to be," he amended.

"Horrible evil old bugger!" Holly declared fiercely. "He got what he deserved."

"Yes," the two boys agreed, for with Lucius' demise, Draco was now heir to the Malfoy fortune and the manor, it would be held in trust by Narcissa until he was of age, and neither of them ever needed to fear Lucius's wrath ever again.

Holly was now able to be adopted legally by Severus, since Lucius was not there to contest paternity rights, and Severus had filled out the forms and filed them with the Ministry two days ago. Now they were only waiting for the official documents to come and be witnessed before Holly was made a Snape in truth.

"Less chattering and more scrubbing, you three!" called Snape from his office, where he was grading homework. "Or shall I add another five cauldrons?"

"No, sir!" They called back, and immediately returned to their disgusting chore.

Back in his office, Severus smirked slyly. A good two hours of scrubbing cauldrons would make them think twice about endangering their lives and making their parents mad with worry, as well as easing the guilt they felt at disappointing said parents.

That, in addition to the fierce scolding he had also administered to all three of them would create a far more lasting impression than any beating. He had stressed, especially to Holly, that any time she saw a vision, no matter what it was, she should come directly to him and tell him of it, not try and interpret it or handle it on her own. "Sometimes, child, there can be more than one way of looking at a vision, and simply because you predicted true a dozen times, doesn't mean all your Seeings will come true. Sometimes the smallest event

can skew a prophecy, like when Silver came to rescue you and Harry. That was the catalyst, I believe, for a different path that your Sight did not show you, as well as your blood relation to Herne. In any case, you should not be interpreting visions without an older wizard or witch beside you for years yet, understand?"

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry."

"Good, and well you should be, young lady, for you scared the life out of me, going off to seek your own death! Never ever do that again!" Then he turned to his son, letting her cry a little into a handkerchief, and scolded him as well for being impulsive and risking his neck too.

"You know better than to just run off like that, Harry James Snape, I know you do, since we've had this same discussion many times before. Yes, I know you were only trying to find and protect Holly, young man, but when you found she was missing, what should you have done?"

"Gotten a teacher or you."

"Exactly. You should have gone to an adult, any of us would have been able to help you search and perhaps all of this could have been avoided had you remembered to do that. Instead, you got yourself lost and in danger as well. If you had died, how would that have made me feel?"

"Horrible," Harry answered, studying the floor.

"Yes. Very horrible. Next time think before you act, Mr. Snape!"

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry too, Dad." He sniffled, trying to also stem the tears in his eyes.

Severus had handed him another handkerchief, then looked at Draco.

"As for you, Mr. Malfoy, I can't fault you all that much, since you were dragged into the forest by Cross, but I know you were probably going to follow these two in there to start with, so I'll give you the same lecture I just gave Harry," he said sternly, then proceeded to do so.

Afterwards, he hugged all three children, told them they were forgiven for driving him insane, and then said they were going to scrub fifteen cauldrons for him and also be grounded for three days as punishment for their disobedience.

"Yes, Draco, your mother has agreed to this," he said before the blond apprentice could open his mouth to protest. "Now, off to bed with all of you, you have a long day tomorrow."

And once the three days of their grounding was served, they would be forgiven and there would be an end to it.

* * * * *

Severus was right in one respect, yet wrong in another. After the three days of their grounding was served, the children did indeed put their guilt over misbehaving behind them, but the fear and terror they had endured at the hands of Lucius and Throckmorton was far more lasting and damaging than any of them could have foreseen.

With Throckmorton's death, the dreadful notes had ceased, and both Holly and Harry could discuss what the notes had said and how they had been compelled not to speak of them and also how the notes had made them feel, which was utterly awful. Severus had been horrified to discover that his children had been under compulsion for so long and he hadn't suspected anything. Some master spy I am! My children are suffering compulsion spells and I just ignore all the signs and chalk it up to . . .to typical pre-adolescent behavior. Brilliant, Snape! I'm the world's biggest idiot, I buried my head in the sand like a bloody ostrich. A small part of his mind whispered that he shouldn't blame himself so harshly, but he had never tolerated failure well, especially not in himself, and so he allowed himself to wallow in guilt and shame and convinced himself that he was an unfit parent.

And if that were not enough, all three children began having nightmares of Lucius and Throckmorton returning from the dead to steal them away, and after five nights straight of being woken up by shrieking hysterically crying children, Severus Floored Susan and arranged for therapy sessions for Harry, Holly, and Draco.

The Mind Healer was quick to agree, once he had told her specifics, even though she was in the final trimester of pregnancy, almost eight months now. "I think this will work best as a group therapy session, rather than individual ones, Sev," she told him upon arriving in his living room.

"I agree, since they all seem to be suffering from the same trauma."

"So, I can schedule sessions with them one to two days a week, preferably in the afternoon," Susan said, then she eyed him thoughtfully. "You know, Sev, with the amount of guilt I'm picking up from you, I'd say you needed a few sessions yourself. Private ones, of course, since I know you'll clam up in front of anyone else."

"Sue, I'm fine."

"Of course you are, Sev. So fine you're whipping yourself mentally everyday for not being there for your kids. You think you're a terrible parent because you didn't recognize the warning signs of compulsory behavior with Harry and Holly. That's perfectly fine, right?" she drawled.

"I . . .I'm not . . .all right, maybe I am, a little . . ." he admitted, flushing. "But I can handle it."

"You'll handle it better if you would let me help, Sev," she said quietly. "Give me one session, morning, afternoon, evening, pick a day and a time. We'll talk over some tea and crumpets."

"Susan, you're already treating my children, I can't ask you to listen to me whine as well. Especially not when you're-"

"Don't go there, Severus!" she snapped. "Just because I'm pregnant does not mean I'm some helpless little doll who's going to shatter into pieces if I have an extra therapy session. And you need one, Mr. Snape, don't even bother to deny it. Scourging yourself mentally over what happened isn't going to help anyone, least of all yourself." Then her tone gentled. "Severus, please. If not for your own sanity, do it for mine. Because if you don't I'm going to stress myself out worrying

about you and end up going into early labor and you don't want that, now do you?"

"What? You wouldn't really. . ." He stared at her. "Merlin help me, you would . . . ah, all right Keegan . . .I'll do it. But only one session, mind . . .it's not like I need months like the last time. . ."

Susan hid a grin. "What time?"

"Better make it Tuesday morning, I don't have class to teach till the afternoon, and maybe once you've rid me of these bloody inconvenient emotions I can teach without feeling the urge to strangle my students every other minute."

"Yes, Sev," she said serenely. "When?"

"Not till you've had a few sessions with the children, they need you more than I do right now. Work with them first, Healer."

"Fine, Mr. Stubborn. But if you don't come to me willingly in a month's time, I'll drag you out of class by your ear and into my office like a misbehaving four-year-old."

He snorted. "Coercion of patients is forbidden. You'd lose your license."

"Only if you report me, and we both know you never would. So save your ears, Snape, and just come to one session."

She knew that once she actually got him to speak about his feelings, he would see what a relief it was to unburden himself and return for another session without her urging. He was a complex man, her friend, bloody stubborn and very critical of himself, but she had dealt with his perfectionist personality before, and she knew how to get around his protests. Once he admitted that he needed help, he would be open to letting her give it to him, for he had learned long ago to trust her, and he would not require as much of her healing now as he had last year. Then he had been a severely damaged individual, his soul torn apart by what he had seen and been forced to do in his course of work as a spy, as well as childhood trauma from an abusive

father. It had taken her a year and a half to put him back together, and still there were scars. But that was all right, for everyone had them, and there was no such thing as perfect. Every Empathic Healer Counselor knew that for truth.

He abruptly changed the subject to a safer and more mundane one. "Have you thought of a name for the baby yet?"

"No, but we're working on it. I suggested William Francis, if it's a boy, for Billy and his dad, or Zachary William, for mine. He likes Aileen Grace for a girl, and I like Serena Joy, so . . .it's a toss up. I guess we'll just have to wait and see. When the baby's born, then I'll know."

"Procrastinating, Keegan?" he teased, arching an eyebrow.

"Be quiet, Snape! You're one to talk, procrastinating my therapy sessions," she mock-scolled, smacking him playfully on the behind.

"Watch it, Keegan. Before I take drastic measures against you."

"Drastic measures, what's that?"

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe a little thing involving my fingers tickling your ribs, that sort of thing," he smirked mischievously, for he knew she was very ticklish. He snaked out a hand, aiming for her vulnerable side.

"No!" she yelped, jerking away. "Sev, don't you dare! If you tickle me, I'll start laughing, and my bladder can't take it . . ."

"But I thought it didn't matter if you were pregnant," he said outrageously, wriggling his fingers threateningly.

"Snape, get away! Your hand touches me and I'll . . .I'll . . ."

"What?" he demanded, inching closer to her. "Call the Aurors? Tell Albus on me?"

"I'll pee all over your floor!" she gasped. "And then I'll die of embarrassment and you'll have to find some other therapist willing to put up with you-you impossible man!"

Severus held up his hands. "Truce!"

Then they looked at each other and both of them collapsed on the sofa in a fit of laughter.

Harry and Holly came into the den at that moment and just looked at them.

"What's up with them?" Holly asked.

"Got me. She's pregnant and he's Dad," Harry said, as if that explained everything.

"Oh. That makes sense," his sister said, then she went to get a glass of milk from the spelled cooler in the pantry.

* * * * *

The therapy sessions went well, Susan allowed each child to talk about the way they had felt about various things-the notes, the prejudice over Squibs and Muggleborns, Lucius, Throckmorton, being chased by the Wild Hunt, growing up in Malfoy manor, or Valina's flat.

Harry told her about the detention cards and how he felt ashamed that James had tormented Severus in school. "I never really understood why Dad could talk about my mum and not my father, but now I do. Because who wants to remember somebody who beat you up and hexed you every day?"

"Understandable, and how does it make you feel, Harry, knowing that?"

"I feel bad and mad too. I feel bad for my dad, 'cause I've been where he was, and mad at James for being such an . . .an arsehole!" he blurted. Then he put a hand over his mouth. "Oops! Sorry, Healer Sue."

"That's all right, Harry. In therapy you're allowed to use swear words if you need to, just don't ever do it outside of here, or else your dad will wash out your mouth."

"I know. But well, it just makes me mad and sometimes . . . sometimes I wish he were here, so I could ask him why he did that to dad, and Mr. Filch, and all those other kids too."

"Well, Harry, I can't really answer that question, but what I can do is hazard a guess that James was probably a tad bit insecure himself. He acted all tough and confident to hide the fact that maybe he was afraid of being unpopular or ignored, some people need to be the center of attention or else they feel like they don't matter. It might have been that which caused him to become a bully, because it feels good to know that there's somebody else out there who's lower than you, and when you pick on that person, it gives you a sense of control and power."

"Like my father," Draco added.

"Yes, I'd imagine Lucius was a bully too. But probably a nastier one than James, all things considered." Susan agreed. "Most bullies are afraid of being teased or left out, so they do things to make other kids afraid of them, so they won't have to worry about being on the outside looking in. That's what I think James and Sirius were doing. It was wrong, and Sev and the others suffered for it, but that's the best reason why I can think of. Does that help a little?"

"Yeah. But I still don't like it."

"Nor should you, Harry. I'm glad that you have compassion, it'll make sure that you never become a bully. But Harry, you shouldn't blame yourself for something your father did. You aren't him, and that burden isn't one you should be carrying. Place the guilt where it belongs, son-on him, not you. Okay?" She gently project comforting feelings at him.

Harry relaxed, and then he gave her a tentative smile. "Okay. I'll try."

"You're gonna grow up to be a better man than he was, Harry, like I am and Draco too," Holly stated then. "Because we know where they went wrong and promise never to make the same mistakes."

"Very good, Holly! You don't need to follow in your father's footsteps, because you are your own person, and can make your own choices and someday you will be considerate and generous adults and you can make your children proud of you." Susan said.

"That's what I want," Draco said quietly. "I want my kid to look at me and say, I want to be like you when I'm bigger, not there goes another Death Eater who scares the spit out of me."

"And someday you will, Draco." Healer Keegan said earnestly. "Believe in yourself and you can do anything."

* * * * *

The sessions ranged from an hour to two hours at the most, and often Susan didn't have to encourage them to talk, once they got past their first session and an awkward shyness, they found discussing their inner demons with each other helped a lot. Sometimes the sessions were painful, especially for Holly and Draco, who had abusive pasts to overcome, but Susan always carried a supply of handkerchiefs and could soothe a sobbing child with a touch or word, though most times she allowed the children to cry themselves out, explaining that repressing emotions wasn't good for you, and sometimes a good cry was necessary.

Severus and Narcissa joined them for later sessions, in the beginning they thought it best if the children grew comfortable discussing things with each other before they came to the sessions. But when Draco began to bring up some of what Lucius had done to him at Malfoy Manor, Healer Keegan requested both adults be there.

"He's going to need your support, especially yours, Cissa, and that means you need to know what he went through. There are things he hasn't told you."

So Severus and Narcissa were present for that session, and Susan explained to Draco that it was important he share what had gone on with his mother and Severus, who had a similar background. Draco agreed, reluctantly.

"Father used to get really mad at me when I said I was afraid of something, like the dark or insects. He told me that a Malfoy should always be brave and never a coward, and only a coward feared things." Draco explained, feeling a bit awkward admitting to such a thing when his mother and the professor, whom he admired and respected, were there. Discussing private matters with Holly and Harry no longer bothered him, he was comfortable with his sister and almost brother now.

"What did your father do when you told him you were afraid of something?" Sue prompted.

Draco gulped. "He . . .he'd yell at me and call me names . . .crybaby, little sodding sissy, gutless coward . . .and then he'd tell me I wasn't allowed to act like that, I had a reputation to uphold and sometimes he'd . . .throw me into a dark closet and tell me I had to stay there until I quit being a baby and afraid of the dark. I think I was five then." The boy hugged himself. "Once he left me there so long that I . . .I wet myself, and when he found out, he walloped me with his cane till I couldn't sit down for a day or so." He winced and flushed, but when he darted a glance at his mother and Severus they did not look disgusted at all, only saddened and Narcissa looked horrified.

Narcissa gasped. "I never knew that! Draco, why didn't you ever tell me?"

"You were away then, at a benefit, and he made me swear to never tell or else he'd hex my tongue out." Draco answered, sniffing. "I believed him." His mother's face was drained of all color save for two pink spots high on her cheekbones.

"What else did he do?"

"Another time he shut me in a room with a bunch of insects and they crawled over me, I was so scared I nearly threw up, but I didn't 'cause

I knew he'd think I was weak and he'd just beat me again." He looked at his mother helplessly. "I couldn't tell, Mother, I wanted to, but I was scared he'd curse me . . .I'm sorry!"

"Oh, Dragon! You have nothing to be sorry for." She held out her arms and Draco came and curled up in her lap, something he had not done since he was seven. "I'm the one who's sorry, sorry I didn't hex the bastard to the moon the first time he raised a hand to you. If I had known . . .I'm sorry I should have realized there was something going on, I should have protected you better, son . . ." She began to cry softly.

Draco jerked his head up from Narcissa's shoulder, terribly upset to see the other crying. "Don't, Mum! Don't cry, please! It's not your fault!" He hugged Narcissa hard and then he began to cry too.

Susan let them vent for quite a long time before interjecting, "Neither of you are to blame for what happened, Narcissa and Draco. Can you tell me who is to blame, either of you?"

It was Draco who answered. "My father."

"Good. He hurt and abused his son and like most abusers, coerced his victim to keep silent. That's a common trait among child abusers, as Severus knows very well, right, Sev?"

Severus nodded gravely. Though he rarely discussed his past with anyone, save Susan and Albus, he had agreed to speak of it this time if it would help Draco and the others overcome their fears. He had long ago come to terms with what had happened. "Yes. Draco, you aren't a coward at all for not standing up to Lucius. Lucius was an adult, he was stronger and bigger and he betrayed your trust by hurting you. You didn't deserve it, whatever he did was cruel and unnecessary, and he was a beast, not a true father. Like my own."

"Y'mean, your dad beat you and locked you in closets too?" Draco asked, staring at Snape in dazed comprehension.

The professor nodded again. "Yes. Though his reasons were a bit different. He wished me to be a "normal" boy and he used his hand

and his belt to try and beat the unnatural magic out of me. I was forbidden to speak of magic or anything to do with the wizarding world at home, he threatened to break my wand if I defied him. Or, even worse, hurt my mother, who was also a victim of his rages. Looking back on it, it was a miracle I lived through those years. Though there were many times I wished I hadn't."

"Dad!" Harry cried, anger and horror mingled in his tone. "You shouldn't ever wish that! That miserable bloody bugger! I hope he's dead. 'Cause if he's not I'm gonna kill him!" Then he burst into tears.

"Come here, son," Severus reached over to where Harry was sitting on the couch and drew his son into his lap. "Shhh . . .it was a long time ago, Harry. I don't feel that way anymore . . .There's no need to worry about me . . .Tobias Snape died years ago, Harry, of an alcoholic overdose . . ."

"Good!" Harry sobbed, and Holly added her own voice to that, coming over to hug Severus as well.

For a few minutes, Severus was kept busy comforting the two children, but when they had calmed down somewhat, he returned to his original topic. "It's easy to believe what your father told you, Draco, because a son looks up to a father as a role model, and wants to please him. Merlin knows that even after he hit me, I still wanted to please my father, I thought it was my fault I couldn't, that I deserved to get whipped for not being what he wanted. I was afraid and I hated him but at the same time I would have given anything to have him say he was proud of me. Do you understand where I'm coming from, Draco?"

Draco sat up and nodded. "Yeah, I do. I felt like that too."

Severus leaned forward then. "But you need to know this as well . . .Lucius lied to you when he said you were a coward, when he told you he needed to beat you or punish you for your own good. He lied, Draco. Just as my father did to me. You deserved none of what he did to you. You were a child, and all children are afraid of something and no child deserves to be terrified into obedience, not for any reason. It wasn't your fault. Repeat that, please."

Draco swallowed. Then he said, very quietly, "It . . . it wasn't my fault. It was Father's."

"Good!" Susan praised. "Now I want you to say that to yourself ten times before bed every day, and write it in your journal too." She had given Harry and Draco journals similar to Holly's so they could record their thoughts in them. "Thanks, Sev, for prompting."

Severus looked uncomfortable. "I shouldn't have, that's your job."

"Yeah, well even I need help sometimes, Snape, and you've been through this before, so you know what to expect." She looked at Narcissa. "It's important that you stop blaming yourself as well, Cissa. You might be his mother, but you're not a goddess. You should repeat that sentence also, keep saying it until you realize it for the truth."

"I will, Healer," the witch promised. She wiped her face with a handkerchief Draco handed her. She hugged her son again. "Together we'll get through this, Draco."

"I know, Mother."

* * * * *

Thereafter, Narcissa also attended most sessions, though she didn't often volunteer information in front of the children, since some of what Lucius had done to her was not fit for their ears, she provided moral support for Draco and Harry and Holly if they needed it. Severus tried to be there as well, but his current course load often kept him too busy to attend sessions, though when he was there he often ended up with a child hugging him and weeping into his robes.

Most times, Harry ended up hugging Holly, or Holly hugging Draco, though once all three ended up hugging each other and crying over the incident with the Wild Hunt, for they all blamed themselves for risking their parents' lives, for they knew that Severus and Narcissa would have sacrificed themselves for their children.

It was very upsetting on one level, and yet on another, as Holly admitted, it also made them feel good. "It's great to be wanted and to know that you're loved that much. I knew that kind of love with my mum, but never my father. And after what he did to me, I felt like I never would again, until Severus came and said he would sacrifice himself for me. And as much as I hated him for saying it, I loved him too. Because then I knew I was worth something again."

It was a long slow process, but gradually they all began to heal, as Healer Keegan helped them confront their fears and guilt and find their way back from the Forest of Desolation, as she called the place inside themselves that was filled with despair and dread and self-loathing. She also used her empathic gift to heal them through meditation and trancing.

But all in all, the therapy was a success, and after a month, the children were much more confident and stable in their new homes and slept without nightmares. They also had bonded due to the intimate nature of the sessions, until they all considered each other family.

Severus too had agreed to more sessions in private after his initial "only" one with Susan, finding the guilt much easier to vanquish after he had admitted it to her.

"Did you have any reason to suspect Harry and Holly were the victims of a compulsion?" she began.

"No. I thought they were safe here at school, it was why I took them with me in the first place."

"Then it would have never occurred to you to check for a compulsion, right? Especially after you had just kicked the crap out of Throckie and thought he was a hawk's dinner, right?"

"Yes. Had I known he was alive-"

Susan held up a hand. "But you didn't. Now stop playing what-if and realize that you are not omnipotent, Severus. You cannot possibly

know or see everything that goes on, master spy and wizard or not. You're only human, Sev, and sometimes you fail."

"But I don't want to fail them, Susan!" he cried angrily. "They need me too much."

"Sev, it's not failing to admit you made a mistake."

"A mistake that could have damaged them permanently. They were falling apart from that bastard's spells and I didn't even know it. I sat back and watched it happen like . . ." he trailed off and clamped his mouth shut.

But Susan sensed he was repressing a memory and said sternly, "Like what? Don't block it out, Severus. Talk to me. Who or what sat back and watched something happen to you?"

He remained stubbornly silent for a long moment despite her gentle mental urging.

Susan waited, folding her hands over her huge stomach patiently, reminding him of a female Buddha.

At last he sighed, knowing she would wait until doomsday if necessary. "My mother. She . . .she sat and watched while my father . . .hit me and verbally abused me for half my childhood."

"And why did she do that?"

"Because . . .she was afraid of him, like I was . . .he hurt her too . . .and I knew but I still wanted her to help me . . .but she couldn't or didn't . . .she just watched while he hurt me, damn her! I understand now . . .he had broken her and she had nothing left for me . . .but I still . . ."

"You're still angry with her for not protecting you the way a mother should." Susan finished.

"Yes. Yes, I am."

"Then say it for me."

He did. "And that's why I'm so angry at myself," he said slowly only realizing it now. "Because I don't want to be her, Sue. I want to protect my children, I want to keep them safe, and to be there for them the way my parents never were."

"And you are, Severus. I see it every time I come here. Your kids love you, Sev. They come to you for advice, and if they need a hug, or if they're having trouble with a subject. They know that you're the one who can help them if something goes wrong."

"Ha! Something did go wrong, and I was a blind fool!"

"Yes, you missed the notes that vanished after they were read and the fact that your children were held prisoner by a compulsion spell set in the parchment created by a dead man."

"He wasn't dead."

"Did you know that?"

"No."

"Then how were you to know about the notes? You are not culpable for things you did not know, Severus. Remember my rule?"

"Yes."

"Tell me."

"You can only blame yourself if you knew beforehand that what you did or said was wrong."

"Ah. Then . . .are you to blame for this, Severus Snape?"

"No . . .I suppose not."

"Good! Now, I want you to take four deep breaths, close your eyes, and meditate for a bit."

Once he was breathing and relaxed, she began to hum quietly, projecting feelings of peace and reassurance at him, soothing away the raw patches in his spirit. He sighed and slumped on the sofa, they were in his apartment, he had requested they hold the sessions there, he was more comfortable there and he had wards to prevent anyone from overhearing or interrupting them.

She brought him out of his meditative trance some fifteen minutes later.

"How do you feel now, Sev?"

"Better. You . . .were right, Keegan. I did need this."

"I know. Next time, don't argue, just do what I say, Sev," she said. "Now, would you like to schedule another session?"

"For what? I don't feel guilty any more over the notes."

"How about nearly losing your children?"

"Well, of course I'm upset over that! I'd be a lousy father if I wasn't!"

"Good. Then that can be the next topic we discuss. Same time next Tuesday?"

"I . . .uh . . .yes. Otherwise you'll hound me to death."

She laughed and hugged him. "You're getting better, Snape. Time was you used to fight me tooth and nail every session."

"Until I learned I would have better results fighting the tide," he remarked with a crooked smile.

"See, you can be taught, professor," she said impudently. "See you next week, Sev. Gotta run, before Billy tries to cook supper again and we end up eating charcoal."

"He still can't cook?"

"Nope. But I love him anyway." She kissed his cheek and then Floored back to her home in Yorkshire.

* * * * *

The next session went even better than the first one, as she coaxed him to admit how afraid he had been when he had learned that the Wild Hunt was pursuing his daughter.

"Susan I was . . . I felt as if I had a mountain on my chest when I heard those damn hounds baying, I was riding a unicorn and praying I could get there in time, that I wouldn't be too late . . . I felt as if ice were trickling through me and at the same time my stomach was about to come up out of my throat . . . you can't imagine it until you have one of your own . . ."

"And when you saw that she was still alive, and preparing to die, what did you feel then?"

"Even more petrified. But I had to save her, and so I offered myself. And then I saw that Harry was there too, and I nearly fell off the unicorn. Because now I had two to save and I couldn't bear to choose between them."

"It was good that you didn't have to, Sev."

"Yes, thank Merlin. If I had . . . No, there would have been no way I could have done so. I love them both too much." He shivered involuntarily, recalling the dreadful fear that had possessed him. "I have never felt such fear in my life, Sue. Not even facing Riddle himself. He could only torture and kill me. But the Hunt . . . the Hunt nearly cost me my children. That would have broken me, if I had survived." He swallowed hard and shut his eyes, tears trickling unnoticed down his face.

Susan handed him a handkerchief, and he took it and blotted his eyes, muttering something under his breath.

"Sev, it's okay to cry. This isn't the first time you've done that with me."

"I know, but I'm . . .being ridiculous, crying over something that never happened."

"So? You're stressed and upset and frightened. It's a normal reaction." She moved over to sit next to him and slipped an arm about him. "There, now you have my shoulder to cry on."

"For what? If you think I'm about to turn into a waterfall because you're hugging me, Keegan . . ." he half-growled.

The Mind Healer shrugged. "It's there if you need it, Snape. Tell me about Holly. Would you say that you love her as much as Harry?"

"Yes. She is very special, though she thinks she's not . . .silly child, she doesn't know how much it meant to me when she called me "Dad" . . ." he coughed and to his horror realized that memory had conjured more tears. Ah, damn it! He sniffed and tried to draw away, but Sue held him and he breathed in the soothing smell of lavender and chamomile that clung to her shirt and he allowed himself the release of tears, tears born of stress and guilt and empathy for what his poor daughter had gone through in her short life.

Susan merely held him, occasionally patting his back, until the tears had run their course, then she handed him yet another handkerchief and said, "Good job, Sev. You've been needing that."

"That's the first time anyone's ever complimented me for crying on them," he remarked, half-amused, and half-scornful, though the scorn was for himself, not her.

"Hey, any time I can bring down those walls of yours long enough to get you to release some of that tension you've built up, Snape, is a good day's work. You're a damn tough nut to crack."

"Oh? Then it's lucky you're a damn good therapist."

"Thanks, Sev. Well, I'd better head home, I think I need a nap. Billy's away on a business trip so it's just me, myself, and I at home tonight." She began to rise from the couch.

"He left you alone when you're this close to your due date?" Severus frowned.

"Oh, I'll be fine. It's two days, Sev, and I'm over a week away from the due date, so I'm not going to worry . . .oh my!" She gasped as a sharp cramp rippled through her. She put a hand to her back.

"Oh my? What's that supposed to mean?" Severus demanded, staring at her with dawning comprehension. "Holy Merlin! You're having contractions."

"No . . .well yes, but I don't think it's anything to be concerned about. It's probably false labor . . .happens all the time to first time mothers . . .oh damn, that one hurt!"

"How long have you been having them?" Severus demanded.

"I've been feeling twinges for almost an hour, but nothing like this."

"And you didn't tell me?" he growled. "Bloody hell!"

"We were in the middle of a session and I've been having twinges all week, Snape!" she growled back, then gasped as another pain hit. "Maybe I'm wrong . . .and it's the real thing! Oh God! My water just broke," she cried in dismay. "I'm so sorry, look at the carpet!"

"Forget about my damn carpet, Keegan! I'll have it cleaned. You can't have the baby here, Sue! I mean, I'm a Potions Master, not a Healer. Can you walk? Is it safe to Floo to the infirmary?"

"Yes, I think so." The Mind Healer panted. "Has Poppy delivered any babies?"

"I think so. Either way, we're about to find out." He helped her to stand, then threw down a handful of Floo powder and shouted, "Hogwarts infirmary!"

He stuck his head through and yelled, "Poppy! You need to get a bed ready, because Sue just went into labor and you're going to have to deliver a baby!"

"Are you sure, Severus?" Poppy called.

"Quite sure, I'm bringing her through now."

Okay, first I'll ask how you liked all the sessions, did you find them interesting or revealing or what?

Second, I have another favor to ask--I'm stuck on what to name the Keegans' baby. I put down a few names in this chapter, but aren't really satisfied with them, so see if you can come up with something better. And what the baby should be--boy or girl?

If you have a preference and a name suggestion, please let me know, it's very frustrating. Oh, and Sev will be the godfather of it. Thank you.

An Almost Perfect Family

They both came through the green flames together, Susan huffing and puffing as she tried to do meditative breathing. "Hello, Poppy. Looks like my kid couldn't wait another week. Must be a bookworm like Sev here, wanted to get born in a school, surrounded by books and parchment. Either that or he or she's gonna be a professor someday."

Poppy chuckled, then ran a diagnostic on her. "Oh yes, it's the real thing, all right. Severus, don't go anywhere!" she snapped upon seeing her colleague getting ready to depart.

"Why do you need me here?" he asked warily.

"To help her walk about and time the contractions and so forth."

"Sev, don't leave, please."

He looked down at her sweat-sheened face, and the eyes that were both scared and excited and said, "Very well. I'll stay." If he could face torture and murder from the Death Eaters without falling to pieces, he could surely face a baby getting born.

Until Susan grabbed his hand so hard he feared all his fingers were ground to powder. On second thought, an evening with the Death Eaters seemed rather inviting.

"You're doing fine, dear. Now let Severus help you walk around a bit, that will help this part go faster," Poppy urged.

"Good, that's just what I wanted to hear," she gasped. "C'mon, Snape! Let's jog around the infirmary, or crawl, or whatever."

She leaned heavily on his arm and he gently assisted her as they walked back and forth and around the Hospital Wing.

"I can't believe this," Severus coughed, wincing as she squeezed his hand again. "It's a good thing you didn't leave before you started having pains."

"Right. Too bad Billy has to be away. No, wait, can you call him, Severus? My house has a phone, his work number's right next to it, you can Floo there. Maybe he can come here, I want him to see his firstborn get born."

"Yes, just let's get you over to the bed. All right. Now I can call Billy."

* * * * *

Some ten minutes later a rather harried-looking William Gabriel Keegan showed up, his dark hair sticking up, his business suit all rumpled. "Severus, how come she's in labor now? The baby isn't due for a week!"

"Babies come in their own time, Mr. Keegan," Poppy informed him, casting another diagnostic.

"Should I take her to a hospital?" he asked Severus.

"No need, Bill. She's fine right here."

"Sue? Are you okay with that?"

"Hi, love. Yes, I'm fine. I'm glad you made it." She smiled at her husband.

"Me too. Wouldn't miss it." Then he began to coach her on breathing techniques while Severus summoned a pain potion.

The potion helped somewhat, though she could still feel the contractions, it took the edge off. "Don't faint on me, Severus," she ordered, looking at the Potions Master, who was paler than normal.

"Like hell, I've seen worse," he said indignantly.

"How are you feeling, Sev?" she queried, wincing as another pain hit.

"How am I feeling? I ought to be asking you that, Sue."

"Nuh-uh, Snape. I asked first."

"All right, Keegan, you're in labor, I'll humor you. I feel bloody wonderful. How about you?" he said sarcastically.

"Right back at ya . . .smartass," she said, a half-smile on her face.

Poppy looked from the potions professor to the Mind Healer and back again, then she turned to Bill, who was standing on his wife's other side and asked, "Is she always like this? I mean, most women in labor are cursing or screaming, not cracking jokes with their uh . . .best friend."

"Sometimes she's worse," both men said at the same time.

The woman in question glared daggers at them and promptly told them to shut up and give her their hands so she could squish them to a pulp for that comment. Both of them apologized, then they allowed her to grip their hands, figuring she would go easy on them.

But then the next contraction hit and she crushed both sets of fingers, making her friend and her husband vow that this was the last time they were going to go through this.

"How much longer, Poppy?" Sue groaned.

"Oh, you're doing fine, sweetie. Progressing nicely. I'd say, another hour or two and that'll do it."

"Let's go for the hour, shall we?" said the mother, gritting her teeth.

Severus agreed wholeheartedly, hoping he'd still have a hand left by that time.

* * * * *

One hour later a piercing wail was heard in the Hospital Wing, as the Keegan's baby took her first breath.

"Well, Sue and Billy, looks like you have a fine baby girl." Madam Ponfrey announced, as she picked up the baby and wrapped the wailing mite in a soft blanket. "Congratulations!"

Susan reached out and took the baby, weeping unashamedly as she looked upon the tiny miracle.

Severus too was a bit misty eyed, and he patted the therapist on the shoulder and said mischievously, "It's all right to cry, Sue."

The little Healer burst out laughing then. "Severus Snape, you are something else!"

"I'll say," agreed Billy, also laughing.

"So . . . what are you going to call the newest Keegan?" asked a curious Potions Master.

The new parents put their heads together and then after a hasty conference lasting about five minutes, they drew away, and Susan answered, "Her name is Kaeleene Grace and by the way, we'd like you to stand as godfather, Sev."

"You would?" Severus was both startled and pleased, for being a godfather to a wizarding baby was of great significance. "I . . . I'm honored. I will be pleased to be godfather to Kaeleene."

Then the baby looked up at him and laughed.

And Professor Snape, terror of the dungeons, smiled. "She has the same laugh as Susan."

"Of course! That's my baby, after all," the Healer grinned, kissing the baby and cooing at her.

Just then Dumbledore entered the infirmary, followed by Draco, Harry, and Holly, as well as Narcissa.

"Hey, Dad, where were you?" asked Harry. "We came back for our tutoring class and you weren't there."

"We were worried something happened," Holly added. "So we went to Grandpa Albus's office and he used a cool map and said you were here with Healer Sue."

"Who has just acquired a wonderful little surprise," said Narcissa, coming over to smile down at the baby and her proud and exhausted mother. "A bit early, but that's often better than being a week late. Draco was almost right on time, thank Merlin, and not too large either. Seven pounds, five ounces."

"That's bigger than mine. She is seven pounds even, and I'm very grateful."

"Oh believe me, I know the feeling!" Narcissa sympathized. "I was six hours with my dragonet, even with magic to speed it along."

"This one took three or four, all told."

Narcissa sighed. "Lucky, and this is your first. Some women take ten or fifteen hours with their firsts."

Susan shook her head. "No thank you! Not me! I'd make the Healer summon mine out of me. Either that or knock me out."

"Me too. Men! They have the easy job."

"Don't worry. I'll have my revenge on him yet." Sue said gleefully. "He promised he'd take all the midnight and early morning feedings for two months."

"I did?" her husband frowned. "When did I say that?"

"Last week. You said after the baby was born you'd do whatever I wanted, dear."

"Thanks a lot, hon. I love you too," her husband groaned.

"Keep complaining, sweet William and I'll up it to three months," his loving wife told him.

Billy looked at Severus. "Sev, don't ever get married. Stay single, you'll escape the guilt trip and the puppy dog eyes they throw at you to make you their willing slave."

Severus smirked. "I'll take it under advisement, Bill."

"William Keegan! I am not that bad!"

Billy said nothing.

"May we see the baby, Healer Sue?" asked Holly shyly.

"Of course, sweetie. Kaeleene's with Albus," she indicated the Headmaster, who had taken the baby from the bassinet next to her bed and was holding her and making all kinds of ridiculous faces at the infant.

"I do believe, little one, you are the first baby born at Hogwarts ever. How very marvelous!"

The baby gurgled at him, dark blue eyes blinking up at him in fascination.

"May I hold her, Grandpa Al?" asked Holly.

"Of course, my girl. Have you ever held a baby before?"

"Uh, no. Just kittens and puppies."

Albus laughed. "A baby's a little different, Holly." He showed her how to hold the newborn, cradling Kaeleene in her arm, one hand supporting the baby's bottom.

"Oh! She's so beautiful!" She walked very slowly over to her two brothers, who were hanging back, looking uncomfortable. "Harry, Draco, look! Isn't Kaeleene perfect?"

The two boys duly admired the baby, though Harry thought the baby was kind of wrinkled and scrunched looking, and Draco thought she resembled a young mandrake and was not cute at all.

"Want to hold her, Draco?"

Draco gaped at her. "What? No!" he backed away as if his sister had asked him to hold a fireball.

"Why not? She's not as delicate as she looks. What are you afraid of, silly?"

"I'm not afraid, Holly, for Merlin's sake!" Draco sputtered indignantly. "It's just . . . I'm not a girl, you know. Girls hold babies, not boys." He cast a desperate glance over at Harry. "Right, Harry?"

Harry nodded. "Uh, yeah, whatever."

"But that's ridiculous, Draco! Grandpa Al was just holding her and he didn't seem to mind it. And Dad did too, right, Dad?"

"Yes, Holly." Severus answered, for he had held the baby for a bit while Poppy summoned a bassinet. "How did you know that?"

"Saw it just before I came in here," his visionary daughter admitted. "Well, Draco?"

"That's different! He's a grown man!" Draco cried, staring at the baby as if she were something poisonous.

"What a brilliant observation, Draco," drawled Severus, highly amused by the two.

"It's true!" the boy cried, flushing. He continued to back away, and the adults watching began to snicker.

"Boys! You're all impossible!" declared Holly, then she turned around and offered the baby to Harry. "You're not afraid to hold Kaeleene, are you?"

Harry, on the verge of refusing, now froze, for he didn't want to be labeled a scaredycat, especially not over a baby. "Uh, no, but . . .I'm no good with them, Holl. Really, I don't think it'd be a good idea. I might . . .uh . . .drop her."

"Oh, you will not, Harry James Snape!" his sister rolled her eyes. "Here, hold out your arms, please."

Harry obeyed, for his sister was looking at him with that daredevil look in her eye, and he was her big brother and he'd be boiled in oil before he would ever look like a coward in front of her. The next thing he knew, he was cradling the baby and thinking that it was actually weird . . .but nice too, holding the little thing. He gave the baby a tentative smile.

"Traitor!" Draco returned and hissed in his ear. "I ought to kick you out of the Young Wizard's Club, Snape."

"What for? All I'm doing is holding a baby, Draco. It's not like I kissed a girl or any of that gross mushy stuff," protested Harry. "It was a matter of honor."

"All right. But next time someone asks you to hold a kid or, Merlin forbid . . . babysit one . . .tell them no! Or else your reputation as a kick-arse kid will be ruined forever."

"Okay." Personally, Harry didn't see why holding a baby was going to ruin his manly wizard reputation, but Draco was older and knew more about the Young Wizard's Club, having been a member of it since he was nine. "Hey, Draco. Since you're not afraid, and I've already held her, why don't you give it a try?"

Draco looked like he wanted to run from the room. But Harry was giving him the Eye-that-challenging look-and his pride wouldn't let him walk away. "Fine, Snape. But just this once, mind!" He gingerly took the baby from Harry. "I can't believe I'm doing this. If Gregory and Vince ever knew . . ." Then he looked down into the baby's innocent blue eyes and he started to grin, unable to help himself. "Y'know, kid, you aren't all that bad, I mean, you look like a mandrake, but guess

you can't all look as good as I do, right?" he murmured, and the baby smiled and gurgled.

"Aww, Draco, you look so sweet with her in your arms," Narcissa remarked, taking great delight in teasing her usually too-dignified son.

Draco went red. "Mother, please! I'm a boy . . .and boys aren't sweet! Merlin help me!" He looked pleadingly at his sister. "Holly, take the baby, for Gaia's sake."

His sister did, then she smiled at him sweetly. "You looked so cute with Kaeleene, big brother. And we got it all on camera!" She waved an Insta-Magic camera at him. "Grandpa Al took your picture while you weren't looking!"

"Argghh!" Draco howled. "Somebody hex me right now!"

"Why? It's not like I'll ever show anybody," Holly said, smirking. "Not unless you really get me mad, that is." She carried the baby carefully back over to the bassinet and put Kaeleene in it.

The adults stifled grins and laughter behind their hands.

"Looks like you've got your hands full, Sev," remarked Billy sympathetically.

"Oh, he manages just fine, Billy," Albus said. "He knows just what not to do, right Severus?"

"Yes, Father. I know better than to give them too much sugar before bedtime," Severus shot back.

"I'm their grandfather, Severus, I'm supposed to do that," Albus pointed out with a rueful laugh.

"You reap what you sow then," Severus said, a wicked smirk on his face. "Seriously though, I wouldn't be half the parent I am if I didn't have your example and Susan to ask advice from. I owe you both."

"Anytime, dear boy. We might have a very unconventional family, but I think it's the best kind," Albus declared.

"Well, children? Do you agree?"

"Yes, Dad," said Harry and Holly in one breath.

"Yes, Uncle Sev," Draco replied, he had taken to calling Severus that after the Hunt incident, it felt more personable than professor, and Severus deserved it after nearly sacrificing himself for Holly. "Our family might be odd by most people's lights, with Squibs and half-bloods and wolves, but I wouldn't trade it for a normal one."

"Neither would I, son," Narcissa agreed, giving Draco a look of approval. Being around Severus, Harry, Albus, and even Holly had really influenced him and now she had no fear he would ever become a mini clone of Lucius.

"We're almost perfect," Holly said, hugging Severus. "Right, Dad?"

"Exactly, Holly Amanda Snape." He put an arm around her and Harry. "And that's just the way I like it."

Outside, they heard a certain silver wolf howl in agreement.

"Your vote's noted, Lupin," Severus muttered, and concealed a smile.

"Uh, how many people are in your family, if you don't mind my asking?" Billy queried.

"Can I tell him, Dad?" Holly asked.

"Go ahead."

"Umm . . .okay, well there's Dad, and Harry and me and Draco, who's really my half-brother, and that makes him Harry's brother too, and Narcissa's really Draco's Mum, but she said we could think of her as ours too, even though she's not married to Dad. Got all that, so far?" When Billy nodded, she continued. "Then there's Silver, he's our wolf brother 'cause he's so smart and saved us all a bunch of times, and

our pets Magik and Sepphy, my kitten and Dad's owl. Grandpa Al is our grandfather, since he kind of adopted Dad, and we made Uncle Argus our honorary uncle, so he wouldn't feel left out 'cause he doesn't have a real family anymore. And that's it for right now."

"My head's spinning," Billy admitted.

"That's okay. Lots of people don't get all the connections," Holly said sagely. "But here's the thing that makes us a real family, even if we're not all blood related . . . we all love each other. That's what makes us an almost perfect family, see?"

"Why almost perfect?"

"Because the best things in life are never perfect, 'cause perfect's only in heaven," Holly answered.

"I see. You've got a very intelligent daughter there, Sev. Knows more at nine than I do at thirty-three," Billy laughed. "Must take after her old man."

"I do," Holly said happily, leaning against Severus, and for the first time since her mother's death she was completely at peace. Hope you're watching from heaven, Mum, because your snow girl's come home at last.

I would like to thank all of you for all the wonderful names you came up with, I had a really hard time deciding, but more people voted for a girl baby and I like Mikee's idea of an alleterative name-one that starts with the same letter as her last name--I finally chose Kaeleene Grace, I thought it sounded very pretty, was unusual, and thanks to HansonHockeyChick for providing it and the meaning and origin. It's Gaelic, since as she reminded me, Keegan is an Irish name, and it means "sweetheart" and is pronounced KAY-leen.

Again thank you for all of your support and lovely reviews and ideas.

The Young Wizard's Club that Draco & Harry refer to is similar to the He-Man Woman Hater's Club on THE LITTLE RASCALS, for anyone who used to watch the TV show or the movie, except they don't really

hate girls. I was watching the movie last night (one of my faves) and I thought it'd be funny to make a wizard club like that since both boys are the same age as most of the kids in the Little Rascals.

Don't go away, the story's not quite over yet, I still have the epilogue to come!

Epilogue: Chasing Rainbows

Soon it was the last day before Easter break, and students and teachers alike were all busy packing and sending things home by owl, unable to wait for the winter term to end. Well, everyone, that is, except for Holly and Harry Snape. Oh, it wasn't that the two didn't want to return home to Spinner's End for the break, but they would miss the family and friends they had made at Hogwarts. Although, Harry had a sneaking suspicion that their father might be planning on inviting Grandpa Al and Uncle Argus to their house for Easter dinner. And probably Narcissa and Draco too. He had been rather vague when Harry had asked him if they would be having dinner with just the three of them.

It had snowed lightly the night before, so the ground was coated with a soft lacy blanket of sparkling crystals and flurries were drifting through the air, spinning and swirling in a frosty dance across the sky. The sun was shining, and whenever a ray struck a half-formed snowflake it created a faint misty rainbow. Both Snape children found that phenomenon amazing, and at first they watched from the castle entrance in awe, bundled in scarves, gloves, and caps at their father's insistence. "You do not want me to have to nurse you through an illness during the holiday, now do you?" he had queried when Harry had protested the need for cold weather gear. "Didn't think so. Put your cap and gloves on then, Mr. Snape. And that goes for you too, Miss Snape." They had obeyed, then come out for one last romp on the grounds before heading home.

The adoption had gone through without a hitch, and now Holly was officially Severus's daughter-Holly Amanda Snape. Not only that, but Narcissa's divorce from Lucius had also gone through posthumously, they had reported him dead by a miscast curse, and now she was once again Narcissa Ariadne Black. Draco would have liked to change his name too, but he had to remain a Malfoy in order to inherit the Malfoy fortune and the manor when he came of age. After that, however, he could legally change his name if he still wanted to. Draco and Narcissa had already left for Malfoy Manor, Narcissa still had some things to settle now that Lucius was deceased.

Right then, however, the two Snapes weren't thinking about anything except the way the light created brilliant rainbows across the sky and Harry squinted and laughed aloud at the wind sprites that had suddenly come to dance and flutter inbetween the colored bands of light.

"What's so funny, Harry?"

"Uh, the wind sprites. They're doing all kinds of dives and things in and out of the rainbows." Harry replied, before remembering that Holly probably couldn't see them. Wind sprites were usually only visible to those strong in magic.

But his sister put a hand over her eyes to shield them from the wintry glare and gasped. "Oh! I see one! Oh, look! He's flying backwards!" Holly giggled, watching the antics of one particular sprite in glee.

"You . . .you can see them?" Harry repeated, astonished. "But I thought only wizard kids could see them."

Holly shrugged. "I don't know about that, Harry. All I know is that I can see two or three of them, right over there," she pointed to where six or seven were cavorting upon the breeze.

"That's what you see? I see seven." Harry said.

"Seven?" Holly peered hard, but still saw three. "Where?"

Harry told her, but she still could only see three sprites. She didn't realize that her Sight enabled her to see the elusive creatures some of the time. "Maybe I can only see some of them, 'cause I'm a Squib," she mused, then decided it didn't matter. "Can all wizards see them, Harry?"

"No. Dad said that only ones who are innocent and truly believe in them will be able to see them. They don't show themselves to just anyone. They brought me to him when I was a baby on Christmas Eve and since then I've seen them every winter, as soon as the weather is cold enough to snow, they come, riding the snowflakes."

"I think they're beautiful," his sister said, smiling as one that was smaller than the rest slid down a rainbow and onto a falling snowflake.

The sprites were barely the size of her hand, blue-skinned and pointy-eared, naked except for a few wisps of fluffy fur about their necks and waists. Their wings resembled a dragonfly's, all iridescent and delicate, etched in silver. When they flew they laughed, and their laugh sounded like bells chiming, high and sweet.

They chased each other across the sky, playing tag in and out of the rainbows.

Suddenly Holly had an idea. She tugged on Harry's coat and said, "Harry, let's play tag and chase rainbows like the sprites."

"Huh? How do you chase a rainbow? It doesn't move," said her literal-minded brother.

"Not like us, silly, but it'll fade in and out and then reappear in a different place. Like that one. Or that one. See what I mean?"

"Oh. I get it now."

"C'mon. Let's play. The person who spots the most rainbows wins and the loser gets to be It when we play tag. My mum and I used to play that all the time when it snowed. If she wasn't too busy, that is." A pang of sorrow struck her then, as she recalled her beautiful dark-haired mother running through the snow, tasting snowflakes on her tongue and laughing like a little girl, her crimson cashmere scarf like a robin redbreast against her seal brown coat, her sapphire eyes glittering with joy as she chased after the elusive rainbows.

I miss you, Mum, Holly thought sadly, then she put the sadness from her, for today was not a day to feel sorrow. Valina would have said any day when there were rainbows in winter was a day to be joyful and thank God you were alive to see it. And I am glad. I'm glad to be here with Harry and my new dad and to know that I'm blood related to Herne the Hunter. She caressed the silver brooch of the leaping stag and mistletoe Herne had given her, which remained pinned to her

cloak until Severus removed the charm on it, so it could not get lost or stolen. Though Holly suspected that if any thief were fool enough to try and steal the brooch, something nasty would happen to them. Herne did not tolerate fools and thieves.

She raced down the stairs and across the lawn, her golden brown hair streaming behind her like the wings of a wren. She spun about in a circle, her hands out, laughing and tasting the snow. "Mmm! An orange popsicle."

"An orange popsicle?" Harry threw her an odd look, until he caught on to her game, then he too started to taste snowflakes and pretend they tasted like some of his favorite foods. "Cinnamon scones!"

"Chocolate trifle!"

"Honey on bread with butter."

"Hot cocoa with marshmallows!"

"Chocolate chip mint ice cream!" Harry yelled.

"Butternut squash with brown sugar!"

"What? Butternut squash? Ugh! That's just gross, Holl."

"Why? I love it. My mum used to make it for supper sometimes, along with turkey."

"Yuck! Vegetables!" Harry made an awful face. "You're such a girl, liking vegetables." He stuck his tongue out at her.

"You're such a boy, Harry, making a big deal because something's healthy," she returned, and made a funny face back at him.

Then she pointed to a rainbow hanging in the air just above them. "There! I see the first one."

Harry quickly glanced around. "I see another one," he indicated a rainbow off to the left.

They ran through the snow, following the dancing rainbows all over the lawn, as far as Hagrid's cottage, and then back again. They were having so much fun spotting them they forgot to keep count and when they halted, neither of them knew who had seen the most rainbows.

"Oh, who cares?" Harry said, smirking. Then he nailed Holly in the head with a snowball.

"Tag, you're It, Holl!"

"Brat!" she shrieked, brushing snow off her cap.

Harry sprinted away and she chased him. She grabbed a handful of snow and pelted him in the back with it.

"Ha! Now you're It, Mr. Smartypants!"

Harry whirled around, pretending to be angry. "Run, you cheeky little snow girl! Before I bury you in a snow drift!"

She fled, pretending to shriek in terror. Then she started laughing. "What snowdrift? The snow isn't even up to my ankles."

"Uh . . .well . . .I'll . . .wash your face with it," he amended hastily.

"First you gotta catch me, slow poke!"

Which was not as easy as it seemed, for though Harry was bigger, Holly could twist and turn like a cat and she was very light on her feet and quick. She ducked around bushes and pine trees and boulders, giggling and grinning like a Cheshire cat.

But finally Harry caught her and tickled her until she begged for mercy.

The two played for a solid hour and a half, until they were breathless and red-cheeked, and their hands and feet were tingling from the cold. "That was fun!" Harry said, brushing snow off his scarf. "We'll have to play that at home in the backyard."

"Sure. I'm going to miss it here, though. Playing cards and having tea with Uncle Argus and Grandpa Al slipping us sweets when Dad's back was turned," Holly said wistfully. "And grooming Dancer and Duchess and the foals."

"Me too. But we'll be coming back in two weeks, you know. So it's not forever, Holl. And after the summer, I'll be a student here and so will Draco."

"I know. And then what about me?"

"You'll be here too, of course! You think Dad's gonna let you stay home for nine months alone?"

"No, but . . .it won't be the same. I mean, my tutoring will be the same, but you'll be in class half the time and what do I do in the meantime?"

"Uh, do yourself a favor and don't ask Dad that question," Harry warned. "Otherwise he'll give you tons of homework and you won't have time to be bored at all. You could play with Magik and Silver, maybe even ride the unicorns. Hagrid said if they let us, we could ride them sometimes."

"I'd like that, but what about . . .friends?"

"I don't understand."

"What about you making new friends here, Harry? What if you meet someone and they want to be your friend but not mine? Then what?"

"Then I'll tell them if they can't be friends with my sister, they can't be friends with me. All or nothing, Holly. I'd never be friends with a Squib hater, you ought to know that. Look, when we're out of class, you can come and do stuff with Draco and me, same as always."

"I can?"

"Yup. Wouldn't be the same without you. Draco and I discussed it. We swore an oath to always stick together, since we're family, even if

we were Sorted into different Houses. And you're part of our family, so quit worrying, okay? And if anybody tries to bully you, come and find us and we'll stomp their arse."

"Dad doesn't like you fighting."

"What Dad doesn't know won't bother him," Harry said impudently. "Nobody messes with my little sister."

"And nobody messes with my big brother either," Holly said, then stuck snow down his pants. "Except me!"

"Ahhh!" he yelped, jumping up and down. "Holly Amanda Snape, you are sooo dead!"

Laughing, she fled, giggling uncontrollably like a drunken wind sprite.

He tackled her into the snow, threatening to conjure a snowbank and dump her in it, when a huge wolf raced up and knocked him flat on his back, mock-growling.

"Yay! Silver to the rescue!"

"Aww, no fair, you big mutt!" Harry groaned, then he chased after the playful wolf.

They rolled over and over in the snow, Harry was laughing and Silver was growling with that playful croon in his voice that he only used when romping with family members. His big teeth never touched the small wizard, Silver was inordinately careful, knowing full well even a playful snap might hurt the boy. He allowed Harry to wrestle him to the ground, but an instant later had thrown the boy off and was up and running circles about Holly, who threw a snowball at him.

Together, the great wolf and his two human charges romped in the winter afternoon, while above them wind sprites fluttered and chimed and rainbows danced in the air. They quite lost track of time, until they heard a familiar silky baritone calling them from the edge of the lawn.

"Holly! Harry! And you too, Silver! Come inside, it's almost dusk and the temperature's dropping. And it's suppertime," Severus added when the three showed no signs of having heard him.

That brought the horseplay, or wolf-play rather, to a halt.

"Dinner? Yay! I'm starving!" shouted Harry. He turned and ran past his father towards the castle.

Silver followed, drooling eagerly.

"Me too! Wait for me, Harry!" Holly cried, sprinting after the wolf and her brother, her hair flying every which way.

Severus shook his head ruefully. "I'm raising a bunch of barbarians, Merlin help me!" Then he cleared his throat. "Ahem! Aren't you forgetting something?"

They skidded to a stop and looked back at him.

"Like what?"

"Walking quietly inside, not stampeding like a herd of unicorns," Severus reprimanded softly. "And how about giving me a proper greeting, since I haven't seen you two since breakfast?"

"Oh. Right." Harry muttered. "Hi, Dad. How was your day? Mine was great. Now can I go and eat?"

"Go." Severus waved him off.

Holly rolled her eyes in disgust. "Boys! They've got no manners." She came back and hugged Severus, burying her face in the warmth of his black woolen great coat. He smelled like cinnamon and marjoram and other spices, from the herbs in his pockets. "Hello, Dad. Did you finish grading all those nasty finals? And packing up all your ingredients?"

"Yes to both questions, Little Sprite," he answered, hugging her back and summoning a brush and running it quickly through her hair,

neatening it before entering the castle for supper. "You're wet, let me cast a drying charm on you before you catch your death," he said, and did so.

"Harry knocked me in the snow, we were playing tag," she explained as they walked up to the castle at a more leisurely pace. "And chasing rainbows and tasting snowflakes and seeing wind sprites."

"Oh? Sounds like you were busy then." He smiled reminiscently. "Just the way Lily, Harry's mother, and I used to play when we were children." Then he stopped dead. "Wait. You saw wind sprites, Holly? But I thought . . ."

"That I couldn't 'cause I didn't have magic?" she finished. "Well, I couldn't see them all like Harry, but I did see a few. I don't know why. Maybe it's because I'm a Seer, Dad."

"Yes. A Seer's eyes see things ordinary eyes can not. It must be Herne's blood in you, child. You are his true daughter."

Holly nodded. "And yours, Dad."

"Always mine," he murmured, then put an arm about her, and together father and daughter made their way to the Great Hall for one last supper with Albus, Filch, Hagrid, and Harry. It had been a season of laughter and tears, peril and renewal, but neither would have traded it for anything.

The wind sprites serenaded them with snowflakes and laughter as they entered the castle, but before the great entrance doors shut, Holly stuck her head out and caught one last snowflake and whispered to the winged fae, "Goodbye! I'll see you again next winter!"

Then she carefully shut the door and ran to catch up to her father, who was already striding into the hall and down to the staff table where the rest of their family and friends waited.

FINIS

One last surprise, how did you all like it?

I really enjoyed writing this one, it gave me a chance to explore some rather touchy issues, like prejudice, and play around with Celtic mythology, and let me give Sev a daughter and Harry and Draco a sister. No romance in this one, but who knows, maybe next time . . . Would any of you like to see a sequel when they're all in Hogwarts for first year?

And now, I have to go and work on Irresistible Chemistry, my Sev/Lily story set during the Marauder era. If you haven't read it yet, please check it out and let me know what you think! A carton of chocolate frogs, a bag of lemon drops, and a hug from Severus (he's in the mood to hug today) to everyone who has reviewed and will be reviewing this. The blessings of the wind sprites be upon you!